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25 February 2019
Julie Elliott: I thank the Home Secretary for that answer. I understand that his Cabinet colleague the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport recently met Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO of Facebook, and was quoted as saying after the meeting that “the UK Government wants to keep its citizens safe online”.

Mr Zuckerberg refuses to come before the House’s Select Committee. Can the Home Secretary update the House on what discussions he has had with his Cabinet colleague as a result of that meeting, particularly in relation to what will be introduced to make people safe on social media and online?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady raises an important issue. I am meeting the Culture Secretary later this afternoon, and then I will get a briefing on the meetings he has had in the US. If she will allow me, I will write to her after that. She makes an important point. It may help if I share with the House the fact that Facebook has announced that it has taken action to take down some 9.4 million pieces of Daesh and al-Qaeda content in the second quarter of 2018. That is a substantial rise on what it has achieved in the past, and most of that is due to its own technology and internal reviewers. There is still more to do, but some progress is being made.

Paula Sherriff: The evidence strongly suggests that much more needs to be done to tackle this growing issue. What penalties does the Home Secretary envisage imposing on the internet giants, which have so far proved reluctant to help stamp out extreme content online?

Sajid Javid: Again, the hon. Lady raises an important point. I know that she, like other Members, has suffered from vile content being directed at her on the internet, which is unacceptable, and that is why more needs to be done. We are working closely across Government—especially my Department with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport—on the online harms White Paper. I do not want to prejudice or announce now what is in that paper, but I can assure her that we are taking this issue very seriously, and if it is helpful, I am happy to meet her to discuss it further.
Mr Sheerman: I urge the Secretary of State to take action. I have not had half the vile stuff that my female colleagues have had, but it is disgusting. I get threats and have had people arrested for things they have posted on my website. Can we have action now? There is a culture we have to change of people making horrible threats anonymously and disgusting stalking. Let us put an end to it now.

Sajid Javid: I very much share the hon. Gentleman’s sentiment. As he pointed out, there is some action that the police and law enforcement could take today, but it is not enough. I do not think that there are enough rules and laws in place to tackle this. That is why we are working across Government to see what more needs to be done, but I very much share his concerns, and I hope he will welcome the White Paper when it is published.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Until now, the approach even of the more responsible internet companies has been that somebody else has to report something first, and then they will consider taking it down. Surely they should be proactive. If people can search for vile material and find it, why can the companies not search for it proactively and then take it down?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend is right. We have seen some good examples. As I mentioned, Facebook is starting to use machine learning and artificial intelligence to track down this material and, in some cases, even prevent it from being uploaded in the first place. Given that this challenge is caused by technology—much of which we embrace—we should be using more technology to tackle it.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Campaigners against the abhorrent practice of female genital mutilation have highlighted how young girls are often coerced into undergoing the procedure through using online platforms. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that the Government’s online harms White Paper includes measures to prevent FGM victims being targeted in this way?

Sajid Javid: I would like to give my hon. Friend that assurance. This House and hon. Members across the House have done a huge amount in recent years to fight the abhorrent practice of FGM. My hon. Friend is right to highlight how the internet has been used to promote this vile practice, and I can give her the assurance that it is one of the harms being looked at in the White Paper.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Mr Speaker, you will have heard, as we all have over the weekend, of the vile extremism that has spread over the internet and has encouraged many people to join groups such as ISIS. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the opportunity has really come to change the law, and to look at how we can charge people with treason? Will he look at the espionage Bill, which is coming before this House soon, and see whether the Policy Exchange report written by me and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood) could be used as an inspiration for some amendments to that law?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes an important point. He will know that this House recently passed the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Bill and made it into an Act that gives the Government some new powers on fighting terrorism. He has also raised the issue of further potential powers, including in relation to treason. I am taking these issues very seriously. We are looking at that, and I would be happy to meet him and discuss this further.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I worked with the Security Minister on what is now the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019 to update our laws to deal with those who access online extremist content, but platform providers have to take responsibility too. The Home Secretary says he is concerned about it, indicates he has spoken to the tech giants about it and has promised a White Paper, but what excuse does he have for not acting now?

Sajid Javid: The Government are acting now. For example, last year I made two visits to meet the online giants in the United States. One of those was for the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism, which the UK Government sponsor, as the hon. Gentleman will know. It is an industry body, but it works both with the large platforms and with the small platforms. We are working with it to see what more can be done to use technology, especially with auto-detection. I welcome the hon. Gentleman’s support—he did support the measures in the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Bill, and I thank him and his colleagues for that—and I look forward to working with him even more closely.

Asylum Seekers: Right to Work

2. Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of giving asylum seekers the right to work. [909388]

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): Our current policy allows asylum seekers to work in jobs on the shortage occupation list, where their claim has been outstanding for 12 months or more through no fault of their own. However, there is ongoing work in this area, and I continue to have discussions with stakeholders and right hon. and hon. Members on this very important subject.

Christine Jardine: I hear the argument the Minister is making, but I remain baffled about why the Government are prepared to allow people, often very highly skilled people, to come to this country and force them to live on £5.40 a day, when they often have the skills we are crying out for, especially in key health service sectors. Does she not agree with me that allowing asylum seekers to rebuild their lives by going into employment and making an economic contribution would make them feel valued and would have benefits for us as well?

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Lady for making that point. Of course, this policy is designed to protect the resident labour market so that access to employment is prioritised for British citizens, and it is important to reflect that about 50% of asylum seekers are ultimately found not to be in need of international protection.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The asylum system simply is not working. Between 2010 and 2016, 81,000 asylum applications were either refused or withdrawn, yet only one third of these people were removed and
54,000 are still here. Before considering the employment of asylum seekers, will the Immigration Minister sort out the asylum system itself?

**Caroline Nokes:** I would like to reassure my hon. Friend that we are committed to making sure that asylum claims are considered without unnecessary delay and to making sure that, when decisions are made, they are the right decisions first time. He makes an important point about returns. This Government are committed to working both with stakeholders and with individual people who have failed in their asylum claims to promote voluntary returns and make sure that they are returned to their home countries, where it is safe to do so.

**Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): My constituent Ehi Izevbaye has been in the UK for more than 14 years with no right to work and he has a 10-year-old daughter. He has been repeatedly turned down for leave to remain and now faces deportation. They say he has run out of options. The Home Office has made a catalogue of errors and mistakes with this incredibly complex case. Please will the Minister look into the asylum system itself?

**Caroline Nokes:** I thank the hon. Lady for raising that individual case. I am of course happy to meet her to discuss it in detail. In circumstances in which somebody has had a claim outstanding for a considerable period and has a child, it is important that we continue to act to ensure that we are faster in making decisions.

**Sir David Davies** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend recognise the importance of work for physical and mental wellbeing and for community integration? Does she agree that we should do everything we can to ensure integration?

**Caroline Nokes:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to emphasise the importance of work. I often say, with no irony whatsoever, that I spent a very happy 12 months at the Department for Work and Pensions. I am conscious of the importance of work for people’s physical, mental and emotional wellbeing, not to mention the fact that children are better off when their parents are in work. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to mention integration. I commend the work of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government on its integration Green Paper, and the Home Office is working closely with it.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): I wonder whether in her own surgery the right hon. Lady has ever had to look an asylum-seeking constituent in the eye and explain to them why they are forced to walk around with a plastic card that says, “Not permitted to work”. The right to work is a fundamental human right, so is it not about time that the Government extended that right to all asylum seekers?

**Caroline Nokes:** I hope that the hon. Gentleman was listening when I made the point that the policy is about protecting the labour market for British workers. Of course I have met asylum seekers in my surgery. Indeed, the ward of Swaythling in Southampton has one of the highest numbers of supported asylum seekers in the entire city, and it falls within my constituency. It is important that we get the balance right and find out how we can best support people into work, but what we do not want to do is create perverse incentives for people to seek to come here by circumventing our important immigration rules, which reserve the right to work for those who have applied through the correct processes.

**Windrush Generation: Compensation**

3. **Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): What progress his Department has made on providing compensation to victims of the Windrush scandal.

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department** (Sajid Javid): Successive Governments have failed the Windrush generation, but it remains this Government’s priority to put those wrongs right. On 8 February, I issued a written ministerial statement to inform the House that the Government response to the Windrush compensation scheme consultation will set out the details of the scheme along with accompanying guidance and rules. The response will be published shortly.

**Lilian Greenwood:** When the Home Secretary was appointed he told this House that it was his first priority to help those affected by the Windrush situation. That was in July last year—over seven months ago. The consultation ended on 16 November, but he still cannot—or will not—tell us when the final details of the scheme will be announced. If this is how he treats his first priority, I would hate to think how he treats the others. When can my constituents expect the compensation they so desperately need and deserve?

**Sajid Javid:** It remains a first priority, which is why since I have been appointed we have helped more than 2,000 people through the Windrush taskforce; created the Windrush scheme; helped almost 3,500 people to apply for citizenship; waived thousands of pounds in costs; and set up an urgent assistance programme for exceptional cases. The hon. Lady is right to raise the compensation scheme. It is hugely important that we do it properly and get it right. That is why we have held a consultation, with an independent reviewer, to make sure that we look at all the issues and it is done properly.

**Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Since our urgent question, the Jamaican commissioner has joined calls from across the House to halt deportation flights to Jamaica. After Windrush, where we know that hundreds of people were wrongly deported or detained, this Government cannot be trusted to follow the correct process. What is their plan for future deportation flights, and will the Home Secretary suspend them until the lessons of Windrush have been learned?

**Sajid Javid:** As the hon. Gentleman will know, this issue has been discussed in the House. He refers to the charter flight to Jamaica on 6 February. On that flight were 29 foreign national offenders, all convicted of serious crimes. He will know that in each of those cases—as I said, they were all foreign national offenders—we took extra care to ensure that none were subject to the Windrush scheme. Every single one arrived...
after 1 January 1973 and there is no evidence to indicate that any had been here before that date. He will know that, under a law passed by a previous Labour Government, the Home Secretary is mandated by law to issue a deportation order for anyone who is given a sentence of more than one year. Surely he is not asking me to break the law.

**EU Settlement Scheme**

4. John Howell (Henley) (Con): What support he is providing to applicants to the EU settlement scheme.

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid):** EU citizens make a huge contribution to our economy and society, and we want them all to stay. The EU settlement scheme enables them to do so. The scheme will be free of charge, and we are putting in place measures to ensure it is streamlined, user-friendly and accessible to all prospective applicants.

John Howell: With exit day drawing closer, can my right hon. Friend confirm that the Government will do everything to protect the rights of British citizens in the EU and EU citizens in the UK, regardless of whether there is a deal or not?

Sajid Javid: I am very happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance. It is vital that we give people full reassurance that their rights will be protected as we leave the EU, which is why we have made it crystal clear that, whether there is a deal or no deal, the rights of EU citizens resident here will be protected through the EU settlement scheme. We will continue to work with our friends in the EU, the EU27, asking them to provide the same absolute assurances to UK nationals living in their countries.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Home Affairs Committee heard in a recent evidence session that those who did not register under the EU settlement scheme in time would be unlawfully resident. Can he confirm whether that is the case? What rights will those people have if they have not registered with the EU settlement scheme?

Sajid Javid: As the right hon. Lady will know, we want to make sure that all EU citizens who are here know exactly how the process works for them to stay. We want them all to stay and we want to make the scheme that I have just set out as easy and accessible as possible. As with any scheme, there will need to be a cut-off period at some point, not least because this is about protecting the rights of EU citizens so that as we end freedom of movement there is no possibility that we can have another Windrush-type situation, which she knows was created by successive Governments not properly documenting a change in immigration status for people who were already here. It is important that we get this right. In terms of a cut-off, we will take a proportionate and sensible approach.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): A whisper may have reached the Home Secretary that my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) is going to propose an amendment on Wednesday calling for a joint UK-EU commitment to adopt part two of the draft withdrawal agreement as soon as possible. May I invite the Home Secretary to indicate, for the very reasons he has just set out, that the Government are supportive of that position?

Sajid Javid: I have been very clear, and I am very happy to say so again to my right hon. Friend, that we want to make sure we are doing everything we can to guarantee the rights of EU citizens who are here in the UK, whether there is deal or no deal. She refers to concerns raised by hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire. I welcome the interest of both him and my right hon. Friend. I would be happy to meet them to discuss it further.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Further to the question from the Select Committee Chair, the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), does the Home Secretary not realise that there could be a large number of EU citizens living here now who may not, for a number of reasons, manage to register by the June 2021 deadline? Will the Home Secretary therefore look at alternative ways that are being put forward, for example a declaratory scheme, so that EU citizens can get their rights here and we can treat these people with the respect and dignity they deserve?

Sajid Javid: I could not be clearer: the rights of all EU citizens who are here in the UK prior to exiting the European Union will absolutely be protected. We will do everything we can, whatever is necessary, to ensure that. The right hon. Gentleman makes a suggestion about a declaratory scheme. I say again—that is a very important point—that that is exactly what was done in the 70s with the Windrush generation and we all have seen the consequences of that all too clearly. They were not designed by anyone; that was the outcome of a declaratory scheme. We cannot have such a situation again. I am happy to look at any other ideas and thoughts that hon. Members have on this matter, but I think we all share the concern that we must ensure that rights are protected and properly protected.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I was pleased recently to add my name to an open letter from the Cornwall leadership board to all EU citizens living in Cornwall, making it clear that we want them to remain here and that we want to make it easy for them to do so. However, concerns remain about getting the message out about the settled status scheme to the more rural and hard-to-reach communities in Cornwall, so will the Home Secretary reassure me that the Home Office will make every effort to get the message out to the remotest parts of our country?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I can give my hon. Friend that reassurance. That is a very important point: we want to make sure that we are reaching not just people in rural communities outside our big cities, but those who might be more vulnerable, perhaps because they are disabled or are children who are being looked after by local authorities. We need to make sure that we reach out to all of them, which is why we are working with a number of organisations. We have allocated £9 million of funding for them to make sure that they can go out and reach all these vulnerable groups.
Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) has asked the Home Secretary about an amendment to be debated in the House later this week, requiring the Prime Minister to seek to ring-fence the rights of both UK citizens in the EU and EU citizens in the UK, regardless of whether the withdrawal agreement is signed. This ring-fencing has cross-party support across the House, including from many Government Back Benchers. What possible reason could there be for the Home Secretary not to recommend to the Prime Minister that the Government accept that amendment?

Sajid Javid: The hon. and learned Lady will know that the Prime Minister is not able to force the EU to ring-fence anything—that is ultimately a decision for the EU. What the UK can do, though, is unilaterally guarantee the rights of all EU citizens, regardless of whether there is a deal or no deal, and that is exactly what we are doing.

Joanna Cherry: Well of course, what the Prime Minister is being asked to do is to seek an agreement from the EU, not to force the EU. However, if the Government are not prepared to do that, will they do this? The British in Europe campaign group told the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill Committee last week that the best alternative to bilateral ring-fencing was to put the settled status qualifying criteria in the Bill along with a clear statement of strong settled status rights. That would be best practice and would give other countries in the European Union significant encouragement to reciprocate. Will the Home Secretary commit to that as a fall-back position?

Sajid Javid: I absolutely share the hon. and learned Lady’s concerns. It might be useful to point out that we can guarantee people’s rights through secondary legislation, which would be much more straightforward and easier, and that is our plan. As we have set out, we absolutely will be guaranteeing the rights of all EU citizens, regardless of deal or no deal, and when that comes to this House, hopefully through secondary legislation, I hope that hon. Members will support it.

Online Content: Crime

5. Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that tech companies tackle serious crimes perpetrated on their platforms. [900391]

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): Tackling serious crime online is one of our highest priorities. We are increasing our investment in law enforcement and will set out plans to legislate in the online harms White Paper, which will set clear responsibilities for tech companies to keep UK citizens safe online, including through protection from serious online crime.

Rebecca Pow: Following an 18-month investigation into fake news and disinformation by the Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport—I was proud to be part of that—it has published its recommendations, one of which called for comprehensive new regulations. The main detail, however, was to have an independent regulator to ensure that social media companies are forced to take down harmful comment. Does the Minister agree with the recommendations, and does he also agree that speed is of the essence?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend highlights the very good report produced by the Committee, which was full of really good ideas. I do not want to anticipate the online harms White Paper and what may be consulted on—the White Paper will be part of a consultation—but I totally agree with her that speed of action is incredibly important. It is about time for these big, hugely profitable tech companies to take responsibility, step up to the plate and do something about this.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): At the moment tech companies are apparently taking down masses of material, but would it not be much more helpful if they were automatically required to pass on to law enforcement agencies the IP addresses and registration details of accounts that abuse their own practices?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman highlights something that is already the case for child sexual exploitation images in the US, and we get up to 4,000 referrals a month from US and Canadian ISPs where that has been identified. Exploring broadening that out would be welcome, but we should not forget that a large part of what these companies do is about making profit. The algorithms in their platforms are about hooking people into watching more and more, and they need to get to the heart of their business case as well as their technology so that we can deal with the challenges.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): One of my constituents, a teenager whose brother was murdered, has recently been targeted by vile abuse online from a person claiming to be the murderer of her brother. What is the Home Office doing to ensure that social media companies such as Snapchat do much more to help to catch trolls making such malicious communications, who think they can hide behind the keyboard and get away with it?

Mr Wallace: I hope that the online harms White Paper will address many of those issues, and I look forward to my hon. Friend’s contribution to it.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Too often what happens is that the content that is uploaded does not break the law, but it leads to the law being broken, and is often followed by harassment campaigns against individuals. Too often Facebook is not just a safe space for that stuff—which it is—but actually the weapon of choice. When will we get legislation to properly regulate companies such as Facebook that, from what I can see, do not really give a damn?

Mr Wallace: First, the online harms White Paper consultation, which as I have said will be published imminently, will be a chance for all of us to contribute to the best policy tools to deal with that threat. Secondly, we need to recognise that under EU law we currently have the issue of mere conduit, whereby one of the statutory defences for the companies is, “We are just a conduit for this material: we do not take responsibility for it.” That is why issues such as duty of care are an attractive policy model that we should look at adopting as a potential solution to the problem.
Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): Given the dangers our children are exposed to on social media platforms, does my right hon. Friend agree that those platforms should look to fund education seminars in schools on how to stay safe online?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend makes a really good point. Some of the large companies already do that: Google, for example, goes to many constituencies and makes presentations in primary schools. I would recommend that all hon. Members approach the company and ask it to come to their constituencies. I went to a session in my constituency which made a difference for young people in staying safe online. But there is a lot more that companies could do, and that is what we will push for in the online harms White Paper.

Crime Levels

6. Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to tackle rising levels of crime.

[909392]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): Crimes traditionally measured by the independent crime survey for England and Wales are down by more than a third since 2010. The assessment by the Office for National Statistics is that crime has fallen over recent decades, and overall, levels of crime are currently stable. But we accept that certain crimes, particularly violent crimes, have increased, and we are doing everything possible to address that.

Rachael Maskell: Crime rates are up 13% in North Yorkshire and up in every single category of crime. I met the police this weekend, and our amazing officers are breaking. Cuts have serious consequences. I am dialling 999 for help in York: how will the Minister respond to my call?

Victoria Atkins: I am sure that the hon. Lady will welcome the fact that the Government have provided up to £970 million more for policing in this year, which means more than £11 million for her constabulary. I am sure she will be delighted that that will be spent by the Conservative police and crime commissioner to fund 50 more police officers and 20 more police community support officers.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that greater flexibility for local police and crime commissioners will better enable local forces to solve local problems?

Victoria Atkins: Very much so. As my hon. Friend knows, the Government support police and crime commissioners precisely because we believe that, enshrined in their local communities, they can understand the local policing priorities in their areas better than bureaucrats in Whitehall.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): A public health approach to tackling youth violence requires fully funded public services, but in recent years policing, local authorities, schools and youth services have been cut, which has reduced support for local communities. What measures have the Government taken to ensure that new funds are available immediately to support the public health approach that is so desperately needed to tackle the rise in youth violence?
Victoria Atkins: I know that the hon. Lady met my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary recently to discuss issues in her constituency. She will be aware that, as part of our approach to tackling serious violence, we are not only running a programme of actions to tackle it—as set out in the strategy—but investing £22 million in early intervention and an additional £200 million in the youth endowment fund, which I hope will bring about real changes over the next 10 years.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I proffer the same advice to the hon. Member for Havant (Alan Mak) as I extended to his hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed. We might not reach his question. His moment could be now. Does he wish to seize it?

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Charities such as Active Communities Network, in my constituency, do excellent work in creating opportunities for young people who might otherwise risk becoming involved in crime. What is the Home Office giving to organisations of that kind?

Victoria Atkins: I welcome the work of Active Communities Network, and I am delighted that the Home Office has helped to fund it previously to provide diversionary and outreach activities for vulnerable young people in my hon. Friend’s area. As I have said, the introduction of the youth endowment fund means that £200 million will be invested over 10 years to provide—innovative ways to intervene on young people and divert them from a criminal lifestyle before the gang leaders get to them.

Fire Services: Pensions

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of changes in the level of Government contributions to public service pension schemes on the financial sustainability of fire services.

Mr Hurd: With respect to whoever is informing the hon. Lady, actually the core spending power of our fire system will increase by 2.3% in cash terms in 2019-20, and, as she is well aware, the system is sitting on £545 million of taxpayers’ money in reserves, a sum that has grown by 80% since 2011. It is therefore hard to argue that the system has been cash-strapped, but the hon. Lady has my assurance that the Home Secretary and I are absolutely committed to making sure that through the next comprehensive spending agreement the British public can continue to rely on a world-class fire service.

Mr Hurd: Of course, the statistic the hon. Gentleman omitted is that the other key thing about 2010 was that this country was then dealing with the largest deficit in our public finances in peacetime history. Over the years we have taken action to tackle that and get the public finances under control—opposed by Labour—and we are now creating the conditions for increased public investment in policing, again opposed by Labour.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What comparative assessment he has made of the number of frontline police officers employed by Northumbria Police in 2010 and 2019.

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): The Northumbria police and crime commissioner has announced that the precept will increase by £24 in 2020, meaning that funding will increase by £18 million compared with 2018-19. That is increased local investment in local policing.

Mr Hepburn: Since 2010 the Tories have cut Northumbria police’s funding by 25% and given it a 1,000 decrease in the number of police officers on the street, leading to a massive increase in serious crime. Is the Minister proud of this Government’s record?

Mr Hurd: Of course, the statistic the hon. Gentleman omitted is that the other key thing about 2010 was that this country was then dealing with the largest deficit in our public finances in peacetime history. Over the years we have taken action to tackle that and get the public finances under control—opposed by Labour—and we are now creating the conditions for increased public investment in policing, again opposed by Labour.
Jarrow (Mr Hepburn) asked, to either Coventry or Dudley, which doubtless have many merits, and which can be reached subsequently in other circumstances.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Residents in Lincolnshire, just like those in Northumbria and many other people across the country, will be paying £24 more on their council tax this year, which the Government have claimed is to fund local policing. However, because the force has spent all of its reserves, which the Minister has repeatedly told forces to do and which we have just heard him do again, the force will be losing 40 officers and 30 police community support officers this year from the frontline. So what does the Minister have to say to residents who will be paying more for a much lesser service because their force has faithfully followed Government policy?

Mr Speaker: Lincolnshire is only marginally nearer; there is a degree of latitude for the Front Bench, but that is mildly cheeky.

Mr Hurd: We are in regular contact with Lincolnshire police. Of course, the hon. Lady stamped to a worst case scenario and ignored the fact that, as a result of the police funding settlement that she led her party to vote against, Lincolnshire police will be receiving up to £8.6 million in cash next year, a move welcomed by the PCC and the chief.

Immigration: Workers’ Rights

11. Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of proposals in his immigration White Paper on workers’ rights.  

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): Foreign nationals admitted to the UK to work under the proposals set out in the White Paper will benefit from the same employment rights and protections as the rest of the UK workforce, such as the national minimum wage, paid annual leave and protection from discrimination.

Mr Sweeney: The Minister might be interested to know that when I criticised aspects of the White Paper last week, particularly the proposed £30,000 salary threshold, her colleague the Secretary of State for Scotland said that he shared my concerns and that he would be making a submission to the consultation about the flawed nature of that arbitrary salary threshold. Does the Minister share her colleague’s concerns about the impact that that threshold will have on young skilled employment in Scotland?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that when the Home Secretary published the White Paper, he made it clear that this was the start of a year-long conversation about the proposal contained therein for us to move to a single system based on people’s skills and not on where they come from. He will also be aware that the Immigration Bill has recently moved into its Committee stage, and we heard evidence the week before last from a range of experts giving us the benefit of their views on salary thresholds, including the Migration Advisory Committee, which proposed the £30,000 threshold.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Part of the immigration White Paper covers seasonal workers. I warmly welcome the seasonal agricultural workers scheme that will be implemented this spring, but can the Minister assure me that she will continue to monitor it to ensure that it fulfils the industry’s requirements and that she will not rule out retaining it as a permanent process?

Caroline Nokes: I commend my hon. Friend for her enthusiasm and determination to see a seasonal workers scheme introduced. As she knows, the pilot starts this month and we are determined to work closely with the horticultural sector and those companies that are piloting the scheme to ensure that we evaluate it thoroughly and look for the best way to take it forward.

Domestic Abuse

13. Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): What steps he is taking to tackle domestic abuse.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): Ending domestic abuse is an absolute priority for this Government. On 21 January, we launched a landmark draft Bill that includes the determination to introduce a definition of domestic abuse that includes not only physical but economic and emotional abuse. The draft Bill also includes 120 non-legislative measures to ensure that our response to domestic abuse is absolute in its determination to support victims and tackle the perpetrators of this terrible crime.

Paul Scully: Much of the support for domestic abuse is aimed at victims escaping from a physically abusive partner. Violence and extreme abuse in a domestic setting always start with small, often subtle entry-level acts of control, manipulation and deceit. What are the Government doing to help people to recognise those red flags and to raise awareness of the dangers posed by people with narcissistic personality disorder, given that NPD is a key driver of such abuse?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend, who brings with him his experience of working with his local women’s centre, the Sutton women’s centre, to help the victims of domestic abuse. He is correct in identifying the early signals of an abusive relationship, and this is precisely why the draft Bill includes proposals for a statutory definition that ensures that all forms of domestic abuse are recognised, understood and challenged, both by those who can help the victims and by those who can tackle the perpetrators of these crimes.

17. Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Domestic violence protection orders give essential support to the victims of domestic abuse. Effective training for police officers on these orders is key, so will the Minister review the funding of the “Domestic Abuse Matters” training course, which is unclear for next year, in order to support the victims of domestic abuse in the future?

Victoria Atkins: I am so pleased that the hon. Gentleman has raised the very good “Domestic Abuse Matters” project, which is run by SafeLives, the domestic abuse charity. This is being rolled out by the College of Policing, and some 14 police forces have already signed
up to it, but there are a number of other training and change programmes available to the police. Part of the important message of the non-legislative measures in the draft Bill is that we need to train police officers and a whole range of other frontline workers, which could include that one person who can reach the person who needs help.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Diolch, Mr Speaker. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] Now that we have seen how narrow the draft domestic abuse Bill is, will the Minister confirm that there is scope to expand it? We have concerns about many areas of the Bill, not least about housing. A joint tenancy can be ended by just one partner, which means that the perpetrators of domestic violence are able to oppress their victims by ending the tenancy and leaving them homeless. We must legislate to stop that.

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady. I feel as though I am in the middle of a Welsh appreciation society. I am afraid I do not agree with her analysis that the Bill is narrow in its breadth. The legislation and the raft of non-legislative measures are very broad. We have always been clear that this is not just about changing the law; it is also about changing society’s attitude to and understanding of domestic abuse. She will know that we have quite deliberately published it as a draft Bill because we want it to be open to scrutiny by both Houses, and we very much look forward to the Joint Committee looking at it and coming forward with recommendations.

**Fishing Industry: Employment**

15. Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that the fishing industry can employ crew members from outside the EEA.

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): The Government set out their plans for the future immigration system in the White Paper published on 18 December. We recognise the need to provide employers with flexibility as the new system is implemented, and our proposals include plans for a temporary short-term workers route, which will be open to overseas workers at all skill levels and in any occupation.

Mr Carmichael: May I remind the Minister that when she replied to my Adjournment debate on 11 July last year she told us that she was “conscious of the urgency” of tackling this issue, but that she wanted to get the advice of the Migration Advisory Committee and would expect then to “reflect” upon it? Beyond what she has just said, how are these reflections going? When will we get a concrete proposal for a scheme?

Caroline Nokes: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that question. He will of course be aware that when the MAC provided us with its report last year it was clear in its recommendation that we should not introduce sectoral schemes to meet labour needs at lower skill levels, except in agriculture. He will be aware that I have held various meetings with right hon. and hon. Members, and undertaken two visits to talk to the fishing sector—one to Kilkeel harbour and one to Troon. I have undertaken to make a further such visit to Banff and Buchan, which I hope will take place around Easter.

**Police Funding**

16. Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential effect on police forces of changes in the level of Government funding for the police in 2019-20.

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): As a result of the police funding settlement, we will be investing almost £14 billion in our police system next year, which is £2 billion more than in 2015-16. Up and down the country, police and crime commissioners have set out their plans to use that additional money to hire about 2,700 additional officers, including more than 40 more in Cheshire, which I hope the hon. Gentleman will welcome.

Mike Amesbury: Cheshire police force has lost 135 officers since 2010, and central Government cuts for a ninth consecutive year, in real terms, continue to put real pressures on our local resources. When will the Minister ensure that our PCC gets the resources that he needs?

Mr Hurd: As a result of the two funding settlements that I have taken through Parliament, the Cheshire PCC is now in a position to recruit an additional 43 officers and seven police community support officers. I am sure the hon. Gentleman’s constituents will welcome that and wonder why he voted against it.

**Topical Questions**

T1. Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): I am sure the whole House will join me in paying tribute to Sir Charles Farr, an outstanding public servant who dedicated his life to national security.

Yesterday, we marked the 20th anniversary of the Macpherson report. My thoughts are with the Lawrence family, and I am pleased that our police force is now the most diverse it has ever been.

I recently announced the introduction of knife crime prevention orders. Dame Carol Black has been appointed to lead an independent review of the drugs trade. And I announced new stop-and-search powers to tackle acid attacks and the misuse of drones. We are giving the police the powers they need and acting wherever we can to help tackle serious violence.

Toby Perkins: The dozens of people involved in the recent violence at Haydock Park racecourse faced ejection from the course rather than arrest. It seems that the bar for getting arrested is very different for someone involved in football-related violence than for someone involved in loftier pursuits such as horse-racing. Will the Home Secretary tell us what he is doing to ensure that violent crime is treated equally, no matter who the perpetrators are?

Sajid Javid: First, the hon. Gentleman will know that ultimately how violence is treated and whether charges are brought is a decision for the police and the courts, but I take his broader point. He will be pleased to know that when it comes to all types of crime, whether serious
violence or other crimes, there has been a decline of some 12% since September 2010 in his Derbyshire force area. I am sure he will welcome the extra resources that have been given to his local police force, which will certainly help it to fight crime.

T3. [909414] Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I am very grateful to the Secretary of State for his commitment to preventing child sexual exploitation. The authorities in Telford who agreed to hold an inquiry into CSE a year ago have only this past week started to look for a chair to lead the promised inquiry. Learning lessons from the past is vital to protecting our young people today, so does he agree that that shocking lack of urgency in getting this inquiry started could place more young people at risk of CSE in Telford?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): I am pleased that there has been some progress—albeit, as my hon. Friend describes, in small steps—in the inquiry in Telford. The fact that an inquiry chair has been advertised bodes well for the process overall, but as a good constituency MP she will continue to press the local council to ensure that it continues its work expeditiously.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Ministers will remember that last Monday the Home Secretary said:

“We must, of course, observe international law, and we cannot strip someone of their British citizenship if doing so would leave them stateless. Individuals who manage to return will be questioned, investigated and, potentially, prosecuted.”—[Official Report, 18 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 1193.]

Ministers will be aware that the Opposition think that the latter would have been the correct course of action. By Wednesday, however, the Home Secretary had stripped Shamima Begum of her citizenship rights. Can he share with the House whether he contacted the Bangladeshi high commissioner or the Bangladeshi Government before taking this decision?

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Lady will know that I cannot comment on any individual case and that, in order to protect our national security, Home Secretaries have the power to strip British citizenship from someone where it does not render them stateless. While I cannot talk about an individual case, it should be quite obvious that the power set out in the British Nationality Act 1981 cannot be used if someone is rendered stateless as a result. That power has been used by successive Home Secretaries, in successive Governments, only on the basis of expert advice from their officials, including legal advisers, to ensure that its deployment is entirely lawful at all times. The right hon. Lady is the shadow Home Secretary and wants to be the Home Secretary. She should reflect that ultimately it is the responsibility of the Home Secretary to use whatever tools are available to keep this country safe.

T4. [909415] Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): A county lines drug operation has been uncovered in the beautiful town of Callington in my constituency. Will my right hon. Friend commit more resources to fighting this problem, which destroys so many young lives, recalling that Callington police station closed in 2015?

Sajid Javid: Like my hon. Friend, I am very concerned about the impact of county lines. She may know that recently I met Devon and Cornwall police to discuss what they are doing to fight these types of drug gangs. She will know that we have allocated some £3.6 million to the new national county lines co-ordination centre, and she may be interested to know that during two separate weeks of activity there have been over 1,000 arrests nationally and 1,300 young people safeguarded.

T2. [909413] John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): Two of my elderly constituents, Bill and Anna Meikle, are to be torn apart, when they should be enjoying their retirement together. They have lived in Scotland for four years, after fleeing South Africa. Following a simple mistake made in Anna’s application, she is going to be sent back to South Africa by the Home Office, where she has no home, no pension and no family. Will the Secretary of State meet me or investigate this particular case?

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the importance of his constituency case. I am absolutely happy to confirm that I will meet him to go through the specifics in detail.

T9. [909420] Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): I welcome the work that the Home Secretary and the Minister for Policing have done to secure more resources for our police, facilitating Warwickshire police to now recruit an additional 150 officers. Given the impending spending review, will my right hon. Friend continue to push for further police funding, to ensure that the police have the resources they need, and also look at fairer funding for county areas?

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): I thank my hon. Friend, not least for his representations to me on behalf of Warwickshire in the run-up to the funding settlement. I am delighted that his constituents will have access to more police officers. I give my assurance to him and other Members who are concerned about the local funding of policing that police funding is the priority for the Home Secretary and me in the CSR, and within that we have made a commitment to look again at how resources are allocated across the system.

T5. [909416] Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): What assessment has the Minister made of the effect of the UK leaving the European Union on the relationship between British police forces and their counterparts in other EU countries?

Mr Hurd: What I can say to the hon. Gentleman—[Interruption.] I am so sorry. What I can say to the hon. Lady is that over the past few months, the Home Secretary and I have had very regular contact with Interior Ministers across all our European partners, and he and I have detected a very, very strong interest on their part in continuing to work closely with us and, as far as possible, to maintain the capabilities that exist at this moment in time.

Several hon. Members rose—
Mr Speaker: I am keen to encourage a new young Member. I call Mr David Davis.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): The Home Secretary quite rightly says that he cannot comment on the individual case of Shamima Begum. However, it does raise a more general issue. In that case, citizenship was removed after the birth of the latest child who therefore presumably has a right to British citizenship. What, if anything, are the responsibilities of the British state to that child in this event?

Sajid Javid: Again, my right hon. Friend will know that I cannot talk about a particular case, and that any children born in that conflict zone deserve our utmost sympathy. He will also know that when it comes to Syria, FCO travel advice has been very clear for a number of years: we have no consular presence, so we cannot provide any consular assistance at all. Should a child reach a location outside Syria, where we do have a consular presence, then it would be possible to provide support with the consent of parents.

Mr Speaker: Order. I should just emphasise to the House that, as things stand, the case is not sub judice. If the Secretary of State for the Home Department wishes to apply a self-denying ordinance—[Hon. Members: “Oh!”]—I say to the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) and others that if he decrees that he will not comment on individual cases, that is perfectly within his ambit. It is a political judgment, but it is not a procedural requirement. It is quite important to be clear about that. That is his choice, and I respect it, but it has nothing to do with the rules of the House, still less the dictates of law.

T6. [909417] Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I am very proud of my Irish heritage on my mother’s side and my Nigerian heritage on my father’s side. Born and brought up on Tyneside, I have never held or sought any citizenship other than British. In what circumstances does the Secretary of State believe that he could strip me of that citizenship, and where would he suggest that I went?

Sajid Javid: A little like the hon. Lady, I am very proud of the heritage of both my parents from Pakistan. I am as proud of my heritage as she is of hers, and she should be. Her question is about the law and about what the law allows in terms of deprivation of British citizenship. That is set out very clearly in the British Nationality Act 1981. It was also debated in this House in 2014 in the Immigration Act of that year when the power was further extended. On a regular basis, successive Governments have used that power and they have made transparency reports to this House on the use of that power.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): An excellent BBC South East report showed that police seizures of ketamine have increased by a third, and are at a 12-year peak. What can the ministerial team do to reassure me that matters are under control, and can I meet them to discuss this local scourge?

Victoria Atkins: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this matter. Ketamine is just one of the new substances that we are seeing emerge on the street scene and that I was discussing only last week with the chair of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs—a body that helps to inform and advise Government on drugs policy. I am very happy to meet him to discuss it, but there is a very clear message: these sorts of substances are very, very harmful and carry huge risks if anyone takes them.

T7. [909418] Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Earlier on, the Secretary of State spoke about protecting the rights of EU citizens, yet my office has had to deal with three cases where EU citizens, who have stayed here most of their lives, are being told by the Department for Work and Pensions that they do not have a right to reside here and therefore cannot access universal credit. Will he issue an apology to my constituents and, more importantly, advise the House on how many other EU citizens will be affected by these current immigration rules and what the Government are doing to prevent the next big scandal?

Sajid Javid: I am sorry to hear that the hon. Gentleman’s constituents are having issues with benefits or with the Department for Work and Pensions, and I would be happy to take that up with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. As far as the settlement scheme is concerned, the hon. Gentleman will know that it has not yet been launched; it is in a testing phase. More than 100,000 people have participated in the testing phase and not a single one has been rejected.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is incumbent on Members across all parties of the House to be clear to all our constituents from the EU that their rights to stay in the UK will be protected, deal or no deal?

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend is of course right. The Government have been very clear that EU citizens living here will be able to stay; more than that, we want them to stay. That is why the settlement scheme has been designed to be easy and straightforward. As the Home Secretary has just indicated, so far the applications of more than 100,000 people have been through the testing phase and not a single one has been refused.

T8. [909419] Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): Victims of crime deserve minimum standards of rights, support and protections, which currently exist by virtue of our EU membership. Will the Secretary of State ensure that these standards are maintained after the UK exits the European Union?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady makes an important point. I assure her that we will continue to have the highest standards at all times.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): Spencer Hargrave and his business partner Paul from my constituency set up a van and tool theft awareness group on Facebook after being victims of crime themselves. Through their hard work, they were able to track down one of these thieves, who is now serving seven years in prison. What is the Minister doing to increase the sentences of those who prey on hard-working tradesmen, and will he congratulate Spencer and Paul on their fantastic detective work in helping the police to bring this lowlife to justice?
Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend reminds the House of the eternal truth of, I think, principle 7 of Robert Peel’s nine principles of policing—that the public are the police and the police are the public. I congratulate Spencer and Paul on working with the police to bring criminals to justice.

T10. [909421] Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Earlier the Home Secretary was asked about delays to the Windrush compensation scheme. There have been reports this week that one of the reasons for the delays is that he has apparently requested an extra £150 million from other Cabinet colleagues and from the Treasury, otherwise the scheme will not be able to go forward. Is it true that he has made such a request to the Treasury or the rest of the Cabinet? If so, for how much, and is this why the scheme is being delayed?

Sajid Javid: I am clear that I want the Windrush scheme to be as generous, straightforward and easy to use as possible, and that commitment is shared throughout the Government.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The Home Secretary will know that the Official Secrets Act 1989 is 30 years old this year. Given that espionage has not gone away, would the Home Secretary or the Security Minister meet me and like-minded colleagues to discuss how we can update and reform the Act, particularly around the issue of extraterritorial jurisdiction?

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): My hon. Friend makes a good point. The 1911 and 1989 Official Secrets Acts are definitely out of date and need to be updated. A Law Commission report is due out soon that will reflect on some of the challenges, and I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the matter further.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah, another new young Member—a rising figure in the House. I call John Spellar.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Does the Minister now accept that although the disclosure and barring scheme was a response to a real concern, it has become a bureaucratic nightmare? It has reversed the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974, and prevented people from turning their lives around and providing for themselves and their families, while also being deeply discriminatory. Following the decision of the Supreme Court, will she rapidly reform the DBS—not with endless consultations, but with some real action?

Victoria Atkins: The right hon. Gentleman will know that Lord Sumption in the Supreme Court described the disclosure and barring scheme as a “coherent scheme of legislation”. The reason for the regime is to protect children and vulnerable people; that is the point of it. As Lord Sumption recognised, it balances public protection with the rights of individuals to a private life. It applies only to certain jobs that are protected, and it is for employers to decide whether they give someone a job once they are armed with the facts. The scheme was supported by the Supreme Court.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What assessment has the Minister made of the success of police and fire service collaboration in boosting frontline response?

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. Northampton is of course a very good example of where the emergency services work together extremely well, not just to find savings in how taxpayers’ money can be deployed in the most efficient way but in delivering a better service to the public. Armed with that evidence, we will continue down that path.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Does the Minister want to take this opportunity to condemn the bizarre events in the west midlands, where we have a Tory councillor and a member of the Mayor’s staff committing identity fraud in order to influence the outcome of the police and crime commissioner consultation? Surely the police are entitled to a higher standard of probity than that?

Mr Hurd: I would have thought that a Member of Parliament of the hon. Gentleman’s experience would take a little bit more care with his words in this place, because he will know that any wrongdoing has been denied and that this is the subject of an independent investigation at this moment in time. The Government support the second devolution deal for the west midlands, and that includes incorporating the role and powers of the PCC in the mayoralty as has been done in London and Manchester.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Last but not forgotten, Mr Robert Courts.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. What steps are Ministers taking that will reassure the people of Witney and rural West Oxfordshire that their police have access to the funding and the numbers that they need?

Mr Hurd: I can say to my hon. Friend, who represents my father’s old seat, that I have every interest in making sure that the people of Witney continue to have access to high-quality policing. That is why, through the most recent police and funding settlement, we have taken steps that will see an additional £30-odd million go to Thames Valley police. I hope he welcomes that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I am sorry—demand has exceeded supply, as is invariably the case, but we must now move on.
Employment and Support Allowance: Underpayments

3.41 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Batessar) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if she will make a statement on the employment and support allowance underpayments.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): The Department is correcting some past underpayments of ESA that arose when people moved from incapacity benefit on to ESA. We realise how important it is to get this matter fixed. Clearly, the mistakes should never have happened, but we know that it is vital that it is sorted as quickly as possible. Last Thursday, I tabled a written statement that updated the House on progress since the previous written statement in October last year. We are on track to complete work on the majority of the original 320,000 cases by the end of April this year. As of 11 February, 310,000 of that overall number have started the reassessment journey. We have paid arrears of over £328 million to 58,000 people, which is significant progress. The Department has also increased the number of staff working on putting these cases right from about 400 staff to approximately 1,200 staff, which will enable us to continue to complete this important activity at pace.

Following the announcement in July last year to pay cases back to the point of conversion, I confirmed in October that this will require us to review an additional 250,000 cases. We have started this activity and will aim to complete this phase by the end of the year. Last Thursday, the Department published an ad hoc statistical publication on gov.uk that sets out further detail on the progress it has made on processing the cases, including an updated estimate on forecast expenditure and the number of people affected. The Department now estimates that about 600,000 cases require review and that by the end of the exercise about 210,000 arrears payments will have been made. The increase, compared with the previous estimate of 180,000, is based on additional sampling and very careful, thorough checking. Alongside the written statement that was published last Thursday, I also published an updated version of the frequently asked questions, and this has been deposited in the House Library.

Marsha De Cordova: Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker.

On 21 February, the Department for Work and Pensions published a statement saying that 210,000 ill and disabled people could have been underpaid vital employment and support allowance after a grave error by the Department dating back to 2011, when it wrongly migrated them from incapacity benefit on to ESA. We realise this should never have happened, and I am very happy to apologise again today. Although I wish this had never happened, we are working at pace to make sure that people receive the payments to which they are entitled.

The hon. Lady is right to say that we have reviewed the cases of people who have subsequently deceased, but she is not right about the quantities of people who would have actually benefited from this exercise. We are only part of the way through, and we do not know, as yet, the total number of deceased people who, having reviewed their case, would have been eligible for additional payments. Where we review the cases of deceased people—of course, we are reviewing all of the cases—we make the payments to their family. We are working carefully and urgently to find the families so that we can make the payments.

On the additional resources that we have made available to complete this exercise, I am sure the whole House would agree it is vital that we get on and sort this out as swiftly as possible so that people can benefit from the additional sums of ESA and other disability premiums to which they might be entitled. I am pleased that we have been able to find the additional resources to enable us to do this. I made the commitment to the House that we would complete the exercise this year, and that is what we are going to do.

The hon. Lady rightly asks what lessons we are learning, especially as we are now planning for the managed migration of people from ESA on to UC. The key lesson we have learned is to make sure that the claimant is involved in that decision. For all the right reasons I am sure, it was decided to migrate people from incapacity benefit on to ESA without contacting them—just passporting them over. I have heard Opposition Members make that call to me as we approach the managed
migration, and that is the key mistake that was made. The opportunity was missed to check in with people claiming the benefit to make sure that their circumstances had not changed and that there were not additional payments to which they might be entitled, and that was the cause of this particular problem. I am determined that those lessons are learned so that, as we do the managed migration in a measured and careful way, the mistake is not made again.

Sarah Newton: I point out to my right hon. Friend that we are talking about ESA, and the entitlement or opportunity to have a Motability car comes with personal independence payments. We are talking about a decision that the previous Labour Government made to introduce ESA and migrate people to it from incapacity benefit.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): We are extremely disappointed that the Minister had to be forced to come to the House by an urgent question, rather than doing what she should have done and made this announcement via an oral statement. On Thursday, we discovered that the DWP had identified nearly double the number of cases to be re-examined and that the errors we believed to have ended in 2014 actually continued through to 2015. Those ad hoc discoveries are extremely concerning and beg the question: what other errors has the DWP missed?

What investigations is the Department doing to ensure that no other payment is affected in such a way? The most alarming aspect of this entire scandal is that 20,000 people whose claims were due to be reviewed have since died. Are the Government undertaking any investigation to determine the circumstances surrounding those deaths and whether this underpayment in any way contributed to or exacerbated those circumstances? Finally, we know that the Department is putting more resources into investigating this, but will the Minister confirm that is new money and is not coming out of existing DWP budgets?

Sarah Newton: The hon. Gentleman asked me a range of questions. First, let me say that nobody has dragged me to the House. I regularly update the House; it is a matter of record how often I update the House through a whole series of written statements and by publishing a lot of data. I have made those commitments to the House and I regularly honour those commitments.

In terms of the additional resources, the hon. Gentleman will know that ESA has not been open for applications since the end of last year because people now apply for universal credit, so we now have extremely experienced ESA decision makers who have the time and capacity to support us with this exercise. We had recruited an additional 400 staff before the announcement that I made today.

In terms of the number of people who sadly will have deceased since we recognised this problem and who could have benefited from additional payments, we are very anxious to ensure that we contact people as soon as possible, and if we can find people’s families, we will make those payments to them. Virtually every time I come to the House or Westminster Hall, Members make allegations about the causal link between people being on benefits and them tragically taking their lives. Members need to be very careful when they say those things. As our deputy chief medical officer, Professor Gina Radford, has said, and as the NHS’s survey data show, we cannot make causal links between people being on benefits and them tragically taking their own lives.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Given that people with learning difficulties find the prospect of a face-to-face interview quite stressful and distressing, what more can the Department do to support people in that situation when they need to claim benefits?

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend makes a good point. In not only the process for claiming new benefits but this particular exercise, a lot of effort is going into ensuring that we find people and engage with them to check whether they are eligible for these additional payments. That happens through letters, telephone calls and even home visits, to ensure that we contact people in the most appropriate way possible for them.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): What is the Minister’s current estimate for how long it is going to take to complete this exercise and to correct all these very serious mistakes?

Sarah Newton: We anticipate completing the exercise this year.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): What financial support is available for disabled people who incur costs relating to their condition that welfare payments are not designed to meet?

Sarah Newton: I think my hon. Friend is talking about the benefits that are available for the additional costs of disability. There are three benefits there: disability living allowance, attendance allowance and the personal independence payment. As a country, we are going to spend over £50 billion on those benefits this year, which is a £4 billion increase on 2010, and those benefits are of course uprated each year.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): As the Minister knows, I have met a lot of people who suffer from acquired brain injury. Quite often, they find that the system does not really meet their needs, because the trajectory of their condition may not be clear and straightforward. They may have periods when they go through much worse phases, and Wednesday may be considerably different from Thursday. All too often, unfortunately, the way that they have been treated through all of this process has made it more difficult for them to get their minds in the right place. Will she please make sure that all 1,200 of the staff she is talking about are aware of the needs of people with acquired brain injuries?

Sarah Newton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his active engagement with me in coming into the Department so that we could absolutely get this right. It is very
important, for people who have not only acquired brain injury but a whole series of conditions that are variable, that the way we do the assessments truly understands their needs. We are utterly committed to making continuous improvement not only to the work capability assessment but to the PIP assessment processes.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the overall tone of the Minister’s statement and her replies to questions so far. Will she confirm what work the Department will be doing with advice charities locally to ensure that people are aware of this process and when they can expect to be repaid the moneys they should have been due?

Sarah Newton: For the first phase of people we have contacted, we have nearly completed the exercise. Most of those people will have been contacted and we will have paid them their arrears by the end of April. As we start on the next phase, we will be contacting people by letter. We have really good stakeholder engagement with a range of disabled people’s organisations and charities to make sure that people know this is happening and when they do receive the letters and communications that they understand what we are trying to do, which is to make sure that they get all the benefits to which they are entitled.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I welcome what the Minister had to say about the lessons learned from this catastrophe. Will she assure us that she will take the upcoming migration pilot as an opportunity to ensure that an alternative is found to the hard stop, so that claimants who do not make an application in time for universal credit do not have their benefits cut off?

Sarah Newton: We are absolutely determined to learn the lessons from this particular situation, but also from all other situations, and to make sure that people have the personal, tailor-made support they need so that they can make a smooth transition on to universal credit.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The incorrect transfer of people from incapacity benefit to employment and support allowance since 2011 has been a big and costly mistake, with over 600,000 cases examined, potentially at a cost of £920 million. May I congratulate my hon. Friend on getting on top of this issue and sorting it out? Is not the big lesson here that, when it comes to new benefits such as universal credit, it is important to get these things right before they are rolled out?

Sarah Newton: I very much thank my hon. Friend for what he says. This is why the Government are taking such a measured and careful approach to the managed migration of people on ESA on to universal credit. It is absolutely essential that this is done accurately, with compassion and treating everyone with dignity, and that nobody has a loss of benefit.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): I welcome the work that my hon. Friend is doing to deal with this massive issue. What more can she do, though, for those people who have, quite rightly, received a significant sum of back payments but who find that they have gone over the £16,000 savings threshold as a result?

Sarah Newton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point and I want to reassure him and all other hon. Members. This was an official error; so the additional payment that people will get and to which they are obviously entitled—it is a back payment—is discarded for all income-related benefits, including universal credit.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Administrative errors and other mistakes in strategy and practicality flow from values, so what is the Minister doing to inculcate into her Department a set of clear values, and to narrow the gap between operations and aspiration?

Sarah Newton: The hon. Lady makes a very important point about the culture of the DWP and the need to make sure that it is a learning organisation, so that people on the frontline feel empowered to escalate any errors or problems to their managers and that those managers are supported by the Department’s senior officials. I have been working closely with the permanent secretary to make sure that new approaches are brought into the Department to enable that learning culture, which ultimately will safeguard all of the often vulnerable people with whom the DWP works.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): These Government errors have led to extreme hardship and destitution for some of the most vulnerable in society—the people who can least afford to find themselves in this situation. Will the Minister agree to examine the case of my constituent Gillian, who as a result of changes to her benefits is unable to attend urgent hospital appointments for a long-term condition, because she cannot afford the transport costs? I was deeply distressed to learn of her situation. She has been told that she may well have to wait up to 18 months for a resolution. That is not good enough.

Sarah Newton: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I would of course be delighted to meet her and discuss Gillian. Clearly something is not right. It does not sound like it is related to what we are talking about today, but clearly something has gone wrong and I would be delighted to meet the hon. Lady as a matter of urgency.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her response so far. Underpayments to my constituents have ranged from £3,000 to one massive sum of £22,000. The issue affects some of my constituents when it comes to housing benefit. Can the Minister assure me that none of my constituents will be disadvantaged by something that is not their fault?

Sarah Newton: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that question. This was an official error, so the income disregards do apply and his constituents should not be disadvantaged in the way he describes.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Given that 20,000 disabled people have died while the review has been going on, it is a shame that the issue had to be investigated via an urgent question rather than an oral statement. We know that the figures have been amended since the last update and that 30,000 more people are being reviewed. Is it likely that the number will continue to change?
Sarah Newton: I disagree with the hon. Lady about our motivation. Since the issue came to light, we have had ministerial statements, written statements and debates in the House. We are absolutely determined to do the right thing by claimants.

Debbie Abrahams: Twenty thousand people have died—that deserves an oral statement.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Sarah Newton: As I have said, we have repeatedly come to the House and discussed with hon. Members what is happening. It is really important, as I have said, that we do the right thing as urgently as possible.

I will answer directly the question about additional estimates. Because we want to be so thorough in making sure that we are not leaving anybody out of this exercise, we did some additional sampling. We were not satisfied that people had always been given the right benefits since 2015, even though new measures were brought into the Department, and that is why there are some additional numbers. I would have thought that Members on all Benches would welcome the fact that we are being so thorough as to make sure that everybody who can benefit will do so.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): ESA passports people to other benefits, so when they get the backdated ESA payments will they be reimbursed for the other benefits they have missed out on?

Sarah Newton: If people were eligible for additional disability premium, then absolutely they would be backdated and going forward they would have those. Other Government Departments have other schemes which can benefit people who claim ESA, but they are the responsibility of those Departments.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): I am dealing with a very difficult case at the moment of a man who is in recovery from drug addiction. He had to apply for universal credit to get himself off the streets and into a house. Unfortunately, that meant he lost his severe disability payment. He is now wondering what the point was of getting clean and getting off the streets. He is much worse off and really in a very bad way. I am going back to him later this week. What should I tell that gentleman?

Sarah Newton: I am absolutely delighted that he has got off the streets and into a substance misuse programme. That will enable him to really turn his life around. There will be lots and lots of support in the jobcentre from his work coach to help him to take those steps to work. I would really praise him for being so brave in tackling his substance misuse and working with his work coach so he can live a full and independent life.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What breakdown has been done of the type of conditions these ESA claimants have?

Sarah Newton: Our focus has been to make sure that people receive their back payments as soon as possible, so we have not looked at the particular conditions for which people were applying to ESA. We do produce ad hoc statistics, so I will certainly take away that request on how we might provide that for the House in future.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): This feels like a perpetual war of attrition with the DWP. I have a constituent who, despite having numerous chronic medical conditions and depression, recently had a work capability assessment where she was stripped of ESA even though her GP certified her as unfit to work. She now has to go through the mandatory reconsideration process which is already adding to her anxiety. Coupled with that, she has been stripped of her housing benefit. What is the Minister going to do about this situation? Will she meet me to discuss this particular case? Will she review the unacceptable rate of ESA claims that are reinstated after mandatory reconsiderations?

Sarah Newton: Of course I am willing to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss that particular case. I assure him that we are absolutely committed to improvements to the work capability assessment, but for the vast majority of people the process works well.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): The Carers Outreach Service says that young disabled people in Wales face confusion and possible injustice at the age of 19 when migrating from child benefits and tax credits to claiming ESA. Education, health and social services are all devolved in Wales, and ESA problems could be resolved with proper co-ordination between those services and the DWP. Is it not therefore obvious that it could be very beneficial if key elements of the benefit system were also devolved to Wales?

Sarah Newton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for a question that goes way beyond what we are discussing today. He makes a very good point about when children are growing up and move from childhood benefits to adult benefits. Those young people will now be applying to universal credit, which has the huge benefit of the personalised tailor-made support that is available through the work coach.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am a bit concerned that a Minister of State does not understand the difference between making a statement to the House and what an urgent question means. She has been brought to the House. This is not the first time I have made these comments to this particular Minister. I want to ask about the 20,000 people who have very sadly died without receiving the money they were entitled to. Is the onus now on the Department to seek out those families? If so, what steps are being taken to find those families?

Sarah Newton: I am happy to provide the hon. Lady with that clarification. The onus is on the Department. The Department is working really hard to find the family members of anyone who is deceased, so we can make the back payments of their benefits to them.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The Minister must be aware of the hardship and misery that these errors in payments have caused to some of the most vulnerable in our communities, but does she understand the complete lack of trust felt by the sick and disabled towards the entire DWP system, in which there is a hostile environment towards the sick and
disabled in which these administrative errors thrived? What steps will she and her Government take to rebuild trust with these groups?

Sarah Newton: I reassure the hon. Lady that we are spending record levels of money to support people with disabilities and health conditions. I am absolutely determined to make sure that we are constantly reforming the system to ensure that everybody gets the support to which they are entitled.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): On Friday, an email from In Case You Missed It News included an item about my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), revealing that the Department’s presenting officers have not attended 80% of the tribunals that it forces disabled people to undergo to access their ESA and other entitlements. Have those officers been reassigned to address this backlog—one cock-up leading to another cock-up—and does this not reveal that the Department would be better off not wasting millions of pounds of taxpayers’ money on avoidable assessments, mandatory reconsiderations, presenting officers and avoidable, unnecessary tribunals, and that it should overhaul the whole process?

Sarah Newton: I assure the hon. Gentleman that we are absolutely focused on making the right decision the first time, but we do not force anyone to an appeal. It is up to them whether they would like a mandatory reconsideration or whether they would like to go to appeal.

On the presenting officers, we never, ever intended to send a presenting officer to every tribunal. We send them to a sample so that we can learn—[Interruption.] I am very happy to answer questions, but I would appreciate it if people did not chunter from a sedentary position, because it makes it very difficult for me to listen and respond to them in the way I am sure the hon. Gentleman would like. Those presenting officers are there to make sure that we are learning from where things go wrong so that we can get them right.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): A number of constituents have contacted me because they thought that they may have become homeless. Will the Minister tell us what efforts the Government are making to find these people to give them the money that they are owed and that they will be in desperate need of?

Sarah Newton: We published ad hoc statistics last week so that we could very clearly respond to the question that the hon. Lady raised.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): We know that many people who fall on hard times can go on and off the radar, and some who have been underpaid may since have become homeless. Will the Minister tell us what efforts the Government are making to find these people to give them the money that they are owed?

Sarah Newton: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that people would have been on benefits, so it is not fair to say that—or to characterise the situation as one in which—people would not have had any benefits. Clearly, some people would have benefited from additional payments because we did not give them the right amount of money, but people did have those payments in the first place.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): The Minister is sorry and says lessons are being learnt, but where is the sense of accountability for this terrible error, which has had such a profound effect on many thousands of people’s lives? Where are the extra staff and resource coming from to sort out this problem? Which areas of the DWP’s work are being deprioritised to make this right?

Sarah Newton: On the question about accountability, of course the National Audit Office has undertaken an inquiry into this issue and so has the Public Accounts Committee. There has been a lot of scrutiny, and it is quite right that there has been so much. I do not hold back from saying that this should never have happened. It is a very serious situation that we do take very seriously and are working hard to rectify. Please be assured that that is the case, that we have made the resources available, and that we will complete this exercise this year.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): One of the many people in my constituency who have suffered from a catalogue of errors by the DWP is supported by Cantraybridge College. He had no ESA payment from the start of November until I intervened earlier this month. He was told there was a fault on the claim but given no other details. What does the Minister say to people such as my constituent and others who have had to rely on the support of friends and family to get through desperate times while those errors have gone on?

Sarah Newton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, but it does not sound as though that particular case relates to what we are discussing today. Clearly anyone who needs support should receive that support. The person the hon. Gentleman describes will now be claiming universal credit, and the huge benefit of universal credit is that that young man will have a relationship with his work coach, and they can work together to make sure he is getting all the support that he needs.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Many of my constituents fall into debt through arrears of payments, whether of universal credit or of other benefits,
particularly PIPs. Can we not reduce the waiting time for people on universal credit from five weeks to two weeks, or even a week, because some of them are in destitute situations?

Sarah Newton: If people have not got any money and are destitute in the way that the hon. Gentleman describes, they need to go to their jobcentre and speak to their work coach. They can be signed up to universal credit and go away with an advance on the same day. I wholeheartedly agree with the more general point about making sure that we make the right decision the first time so that people are not delayed by going through mandatory reconsideration and appeals, and that is what we are working to do.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): When it comes to the 20,000 deaths, the Minister says that we as MPs cannot draw cause and effect in terms of underpayments. But surely, as a Minister, she cannot rule out any contributory factors unless we have a proper review and investigation into the circumstances in which those people died and what the effect of underpayments was. When will that review and investigation take place?

Sarah Newton: Let me reassure the hon. Gentleman and other Members that if anyone makes an assertion to the DWP that in some way the treatment of someone’s benefits contributed to them taking their own life, that matter is taken extremely seriously and a full investigation is undertaken into the circumstances.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Some 20,000 people have died since failing their work capability assessment in one way or another. Regardless of the circumstances of their deaths—we have to remember that six Secretaries of State and various junior Ministers have stood at that Dispatch Box and denied any link between social security failure and food bank use—surely it highlights the failure of the veracity of the work capability assessments, which require fundamental review. Will the Minister advise from which work streams the capability assessments, which require fundamental review, take place?

Sarah Newton: Let me provide some clarification to the hon. Gentleman. What we are talking about today is people who were underpaid benefits. As they came across from IB on to ESA, they were put on to a contribution ESA when they could have been entitled to an income-related ESA. It is nothing to do with the work capability assessment, so the basic premise of his question is inaccurate.

On previous points, the morbidity surveys that the NHS undertakes looking at suicides are a matter of record. They are a very serious matter and are reported by the NHS.

Sarah Newton: For the figures that are published, the accompanying statutory guidance for schools. That, following debate, will finalise the process, and we will undertake into the circumstances.

Sarah Newton: There are understandable and legitimate areas of contention. In reviewing responses and determining the final content of regulations and guidance, we have retained a focus on the core principles for the new subjects that Parliament endorsed through the Children and Social Work Act. Our guiding principles have been that these compulsory subjects should help to keep children safe, help to prepare them for the world in which they are growing up—including the laws relating to relationships, sex and health—and help to foster respect for others and for difference. Content must be appropriate in terms of age and developmentally, and must be taught in a sensitive and inclusive way with respect for the backgrounds and beliefs of pupils.

Parents and carers are the prime teachers for children on many of these matters, and schools complement and reinforce that role by building on what pupils learn at home. We have retained the long-standing ability for parents to request that their child be withdrawn from
the sex education element of RSE. The school should respect the parents’ request to withdraw the child, except in exceptional circumstances, up to and until three terms before the child reaches the age of 16. At that point, if the child wishes to take part in sex education lessons, the headteacher should ensure that they receive it in one of those terms. In response to the consultation, we have further clarified in the guidance how and when a pupil’s special educational needs may be taken into consideration, and the fact that headteachers should document their decision-making process on the right to withdraw.

We believe that after reviewing the consultation responses, we have struck a balance between prescribing clearly the important core knowledge that all pupils should be taught, and allowing flexibility for schools to design a curriculum that is relevant to their pupils. We have made a small number of changes that we felt were important and would further strengthen the intent of the guidance. For example, we have made changes to the content on puberty to reflect the need for menstruation and menstrual wellbeing to be taught in all primary and secondary schools.

Given the lack of distinction that young people make between online and offline contexts, we have expanded teaching about internet safety and harms to include content on the potential risks of excessive screen time, and on how to be a discerning consumer of information and other content online. We have included teaching about rape, female genital mutilation and forced marriage in secondary RSE, and we have amended the content on organ and blood donation to include the science relating to stem cell donation. We are committed to ensuring that every school will have the support that it needs to deliver those subjects and maintain a high and consistent quality by September 2020. We will be investing in tools that will improve schools’ practice, such as a supplementary guide to support the delivery of the guidance, targeted support for materials, and training. For the financial year about to begin we have allocated up to £6 million to invest in the development of those tools.

We will also continue to encourage as many schools as possible to start teaching these subjects from September 2019, partly so that we can learn lessons and share good practice about how these subjects are being taught, and allowing flexibility for schools to design a curriculum that is relevant to their pupils. We have made a small number of changes that we felt were important and would further strengthen the intent of the guidance. For example, we have made changes to the content on puberty to reflect the need for menstruation and menstrual wellbeing to be taught in all primary and secondary schools.

We believe that these proposals are an historic step in education that will help equip children and young people with the knowledge and support they need to form healthy relationships, lead healthy lives and be happy and safe in the world today. I commend this statement to the House.

4.26 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement, and let me also say that we welcome its direction of travel.

As the Secretary of State said, the work of many colleagues across the House has led to today’s announcement, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) and for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), as well as my hon. Friends the Members for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), who did so much from the Back Benches. It is only fair to note also, as the Secretary of State did, the contribution of the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), and the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) for her initial commitment to these changes.

There are a number of questions that I hope the Secretary of State can address. He said there would be a £6 million budget to support schools. With over 23,000 schools in England, this amounts to about £250 per school; is he confident that this is enough, and how will it be distributed? Will training be available to every teacher who requests it, and how many teachers will receive it over the next two school years? Is this new Treasury funding or money diverted from existing education budgets?

On the guidance itself, giving children a voice in this part of their education is hugely important, and I welcome the Secretary of State’s recognition of that vital point. However, can he explain why, since the curriculum will always be age-appropriate, he will not allow children to opt in at a younger age? He referred to “exceptional circumstances” in which the opt-out will not be allowed; can he tell the House what such circumstances might be?

The Secretary of State will know the horrifying figures on bullying and mental health problems that affect young LGBT people. Addressing these issues in the curriculum would be a milestone in ensuring that they and others can grow up understanding more and living in a safer environment. At his last statement, I told the Secretary of State that these issues must not be an anathema to the rest of the curriculum, so I am glad that the draft guidance says they must be fully incorporated into the curriculum and not taught separately. However, paragraph 38 of the guidance says this only has to be taught “at the point at which schools consider it appropriate.”

I know the Secretary of State’s Department has said it expects all pupils to be taught LGBT content, but how will he address the risk that some might be excluded?

Paragraph 21 of the guidance allows schools to “teach about faith perspectives”, and schools with a “religious character” to teach a “distinctive faith perspective on relationships”, and it says that “balanced debate may take place about issues that are seen as contentious.”

The Secretary of State will know there are concerns, particularly in the Jewish and Muslim communities, about both his Department and Ofsted, and I am sure we both want our education system to reflect the diversity
of our country and provide the opportunity to learn more about it. But can he also be absolutely clear that his guidance does not permit teaching that could be hostile or damaging to LGBT young people in particular?

I welcome the Secretary of State’s words on health education and on the importance of mental health, but can he assure us that he does not intend simply to shift the burden of diagnosis on to teachers, and that greater provision of professional health services will be available? For example, has he considered matching our commitment to ensuring that access to a counselling service is available in every secondary school? I am glad that he has addressed the issue of menstruation, but that would surely be complemented by concrete steps such as those we have proposed to tackle period poverty in schools. Can he tell us whether subjects such as the menopause are also included?

The Secretary of State’s commitment on online safety is also welcome, but is he pushing for firmer action aimed at the giant businesses that profit from social media without taking any proper responsibility? I welcome the inclusion of education on female genital mutilation in the curriculum, but girls are at risk of FGM when they are very young, so can he explain why this issue will not be included in the primary curriculum and tell us what other steps he is taking to tackle it? I believe that we are all better off through understanding the issues that we each face, and I hope that the whole House can work together to make this a reality for the next generation.

**Damian Hinds:** The hon. Lady has raised a number of issues, but I should like to start by thanking her for the collaborative and co-operative cross-party way in which she and her colleagues have addressed this matter. We want the subjects to help young people be healthy, happy and safe, and the building blocks start in primary school—particularly those dealing with healthy family relationships and friendships. At secondary level, this moves on to thinking about young people as potential partners and parents and therefore covers content on intimate relationships, sex, online harms and more complex mental health content. She asked about our wider approach on mental health, and she will know of our commitment—my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary is sitting next to me—to ensuring that support teams are rolled out across the country to work with schools, and to ensuring that there is a designated mental health lead to look at mental health first aid. Overall, the recognition that we all have of mental health is higher now than it is ever been.

The hon. Lady asked about LGBT content. Schools should address that, as they do other subjects, in an age-appropriate way. Schools, teachers and headteachers know their cohorts of children better than anyone, alongside their parents. We expect this education to happen, at least in secondary schools, so that by the time someone finishes school they have covered that content, but it could happen in primary school as well. Of course, it should not be hostile to any group, and we need schools to be sensitive to the different kinds of families that children might come into contact with. That is partly about LGBT people, but it is also about other types of family. For example, children might be growing up with foster parents, grandparents or single parents, and schools need to be sensitive to whatever the set-up might be. The hon. Lady also asked specifically about LGBT bullying. That is of course a matter of great concern, and we know from surveys that LGBT-related bullying is quite prevalent. As she will know, we are funding four anti-bullying organisations, and the Government Equalities Office is also working with organisations on transphobic and biphobic bullying.

There is a parental right to request the withdrawal of their child from sex education, but we have carefully balanced that with the right of the child as they get older and become competent to make their own decisions. I think that we have struck the right balance there. The hon. Lady asked about exceptional circumstances. It is difficult to codify exactly what those exceptional circumstances could be—by definition, because they are exceptional—but the guidance sets out how headteachers should go about discussing these matters with parents. That is good practice, and they should honour that right to request withdrawal until three terms before the child reaches the age of 16. More broadly, we encourage schools to work with parents, and there is an obligation to consult parents on the content of these subjects and to publish that consultation on the internet. The hon. Lady asked specifically about faith groups, and it is correct to say that in the guidance we set out that the core content must be covered, but beyond that faith-based schools can reflect the teachings and traditions of their faith to help to build on that.

Overall, we need the right resourcing and support to help schools to deliver this properly, which is why we have budget available to do that. That will cover both online and face-to-face training, but of course we will continue to look at this as the programme gets rolled out to make sure that we have absolutely the right support in place.

**Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): I strongly welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement. Did he see the report in *The Times* at the weekend suggesting that more than 6,000 sex assaults had taken place in schools between 2015 and 2017, which was an increase of 60% during that time, and that some victims were forced to stay in the same school as those who had conducted the sexual assault? Will he look into that and ensure that it does not continue?

**Damian Hinds:** Yes, and of course I share my right hon. Friend’s deep concern. Our “Keeping children safe in education” guidance sets out what should happen on safeguarding in schools. It includes specific guidance on what happens with reports of sexual violence and harassment between children, to ensure that if someone is at risk or is going to be at risk, an immediate referral should be made. If appropriate, that should be to the police.

**Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I hope everyone in this place can agree than this is a long overdue but welcome update. We know that young people are hitting puberty younger than ever before, so it is good to see the inclusion of menstruation in these guidelines. Is the Secretary of State planning to follow the Scottish Government’s example and make free sanitary products available in schools, both primary and secondary, across England?
It is important that parents remain the primary educators of their children, and that there is a partnership between schools and parents. Although I respect the right of parents to withdraw their children from these lessons, I make an appeal to those parents: children talk, so would it not be better that children and young people are taught by trained professionals, in a safe environment, where questions can be answered accurately and with sensitivity, rather than their getting half stories in uncensored chat in the playground?

The Secretary of State has confirmed that diversity, inclusion and tolerance will form the basis of these new proposals, and that young people will be supported in making safe and informed decisions about their sexual and emotional health and wellbeing as they prepare for adult life. Will these guidelines also support the aims of the TIE—Time for Inclusive Education—campaign with respect to LGBT rights and tolerance? Can he confirm that sex and health education will tie in with the Government’s anti-bullying strategy to ensure that pupils are taught the importance of acceptance and are aware of the support available to them?

I am slightly concerned about the age at which FGM is going to be tackled, but perhaps the Secretary of State could tell us at exactly what age he proposes that this should start. We know that this practice is happening at a very young age, so children do need to be aware of it.

Finally, in recent evidence to the Select Committee on Science and Technology’s inquiry on the impact of social media and screen use on young people’s health, we heard disturbing evidence that 48% of 11 to 16-year-olds had seen online pornography, with many of them having done so simply because it had “just popped up”. What can the Minister tell us about his plans to ensure that children are properly educated about the harmful effects of online pornography, including revenge porn, to ensure that young people are able to stay safe online and are aware of the consequences of this practice on both the victim and the perpetrator? What will he do to ensure that all young people, whether their parents have removed them from the lessons or not, will get these lessons, particularly those on safety online?

Damian Hinds: Again, there were a lot of questions in what the hon. Lady said. I am not sure I am going to be able to do justice to them by giving them all full answers, but I have a feeling that many of those topics will come up again during the course of questions. This guidance is for schools in England, but of course these are areas of shared concern. The hon. Lady is quite right that children talk, and these days they not only talk but see stuff on a screen. That is why it is much better to receive these messages from, as she rightly said, a trained teacher in a safe and supportive environment. Respect for LGBT people and so on is at the heart of this, and we are absolutely integrating what we are doing in this area with our work on bullying, as I said to the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), who speaks for the Opposition.

We will ensure that children in secondary school talk about the harmful effects of pornography and are aware of the wider issues around pornography and respect for others. That touches on some other issues, to do with privacy and some of the additional problems that people can run into online. [Interjection.] The hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) says “consent”. She is absolutely right. Consent these days is a multifaceted question, when we are talking about images of people and the control that they lose over them if somebody else comes into possession of them.

Finally, we need a whole-society approach to eradicating FGM, so that there is not another generation coming forward that is at risk of it. When we talk about FGM, we are not talking specifically about girls who are individually at risk. This is also about those growing up who will be the nurses, teachers, police officers, community support workers—you name it—of tomorrow and ensuring that we are aware of these issues throughout our society so that we can do better to stamp FGM out.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I welcome the steps forward being taken today. They are incredibly important for many children and especially young people, whose voices have been listened to. It is very hard for them to protect themselves from a risk if they have never been alerted to its existence in the first place. It is also very hard for them to know what is normal and acceptable online—what they should share, what they should look at and what they should put online themselves—if no one has ever sat down and tried to explain to them the context and how that behaviour affects others, so what we are doing is crucial. Clearly, the online world in particular moves at a pace that often makes it hard for this place to keep up. Will my right hon. Friend set out what plans there are to ensure that it is not another 19 years before a Government revisit and update the guidance?

Damian Hinds: I said it earlier, but I will say it again because it bears repeating: let me express my thanks and appreciation to my right hon. Friend for the leadership she has shown on these issues over an extended period. I can make a commitment that it will not be another 19 years. During the passage of the legislation, our hon. Friend Edward Timpson, the then Member for Crewe and Nantwich, committed us to updating the guidance much more regularly—every three years or so—although it might need to be updated more quickly because, as my right hon. Friend rightly said, all these things are now moving at such a pace.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I wholeheartedly welcome the Secretary of State’s statement today. I know that these are not easy issues to navigate, and he is doing a really good job of it. With that in mind, I urge him to keep going, because there will be those who say that they want exceptions or want to exclude their children, or that their school is somehow different. I have visited many schools, as I am sure he has, where the majority of children are Muslim or of other faiths. They deliver teaching on LGBT bullying, LGBT awareness and all those issues extremely well, resulting in very well rounded children, so the Secretary of State will have our full support if he wants to continue doing this work.

Damian Hinds: I thank the hon. Lady for her kind words. Of course, many people have been involved in this work, and I know that it has support right across the House. I join her in commending schools—faith schools, community schools; all sorts of schools—that do such a good job of ensuring that all their children feel totally included and supported as they grow up.
Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): The last time sex and relationships guidance was updated, the internet had not been invented, sexting had not been invented, social media had not been invented—the list goes on. All these things have become part of our children’s childhood, so my right hon. Friends on the Front Bench today deserve the wholehearted support of everyone in this House for what they have done.

How will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State make sure that parents understand that enabling their children to be part of sex and relationship education is about helping to keep them safe and that it is not a threat to their children’s safety? It is through that work that the Government can most help schools understand how they deliver.

Damian Hinds: My right hon. Friend characteristicly makes a very telling intervention. She is absolutely right. As we have gone through this process, I have been struck by the support that has come from some quite unexpected quarters. Often that is because of the jolt that adults have had from discovering the things that children find out and see on the internet in particular. There have always been stranger dangers, but there are now dangers from people whom children do not consider to be strangers or to be a threat and that has galvanised many people into supporting this kind of action.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I very much welcome today’s announcement, but I should also say that of course 10 years ago the previous Labour Government made very similar proposals to the ones that have been announced today and, unfortunately, the Conservative party at that time could not agree with them or support them. I am delighted that there has been that change of heart.

I want to draw to the attention of the Secretary of State two constituents in my area, Stephanie Trotter and Vicky Parkey, who had a note put through their door on Thursday evening, which basically said that their relationship was immoral. It questioned their right or anything else. How boring life would be if we were all the same. This very diversity sums up why all previous Conservative Governments have recognised that religious people, and indeed non-religious people, have their own justifiable formal belief about the best way to teach sex education. All previous Conservative Governments, therefore, have given an untrammelled right to parents to remove their children from sex education, but here, in certain circumstances, that right has been transferred to the headteacher—a fundamental shift of power to the state. How does that square with what Edward Timpson, the then Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families, said during the passage of the Children and Social Work Bill? He said:

“We have committed to retain a right to withdraw from sex education in RSE, because parents should have the right, if they wish, to teach sex education themselves in a way that is consistent with their values.”—[Official Report, 7 March 2017; Vol. 622, c. 705.]

Damian Hinds: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. I do not think I can do any better than read word for word from the guidance:

“Once those discussions”— that is to say, those on the request to withdraw— “have taken place, except in exceptional circumstances, the school should respect the parents’ request to withdraw the child, up to and until three terms before the child turns 16. After that point, if the child wishes to receive sex education rather than be withdrawn, the school should make arrangements to provide the child with sex education during one of those terms.”

But the right continues to exist up until the three terms before the child reaches 16.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I too wholeheartedly welcome this guidance. When I was a teacher, these were the lessons that I loved teaching the most. However, without good training, without a full understanding of the full evidence behind them, these lessons are really quite difficult to teach, and not all teachers are adept at doing that. What assurance can the Secretary of State give to all teachers that, if they are going to be teaching this, they will get proper training, not just online tools? Furthermore, will they have the time to be able to engage not just with that, but with the conversations that come naturally after these lessons as well?

Damian Hinds: I am glad to hear that the hon. Lady really enjoyed teaching these lessons. That is not true, of course, for every single teacher. Some can find it quite difficult, which makes the provision of good training and materials even more important. There are lots of third party organisations that produce high quality materials. We want to make sure that schools are easily able to access them, but I can give her the commitment that we will make sure that good training is in place.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am afraid that the Secretary of State did not quite answer the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). I agree with most of this, but I remember Edward Timpson categorically saying that parents would have the right to withdraw their children if they wanted to. The Secretary of State has made a very strong case for the three terms before the age of 16 exception, but he keeps adding the words, “unless there are exceptional circumstances”. Why have those words been added? In what circumstances would...
a headteacher overrule a parent? Is not the likely effect of this going to be that in some cases, instead of children getting necessary sex education in schools, more parents are going to keep their children out of school?

Damian Hinds: We do not want parents to keep their children out of school. I hope I can reassure my right hon. Friend that the intention is to say that the long-standing right to withdraw children from sex education does not apply to relationships education or the subject of human reproduction in the science curriculum, but that there is that right to request when it comes to sex education. The request is put to the headteacher, and the guidance that we issue to headteachers clearly says that the headteacher should comply with that request up to three terms before the child reaches the age of 16. Why three terms before the age of 16? Because 16 is the age of consent, so the child should be able—if they wish—to have some sex education for at least a term before they reach that age.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement and the impressive range of reforms that he is introducing, but will he say something about how the increasing number of children who are being home-educated will benefit from these reforms?

Damian Hinds: There is a distinction to be drawn between children who are being home-educated and children who are not in school but who are sometimes statistically deemed to be home-educated because they are not in school; those are two different matters. Many parents are home-educating their children, sometimes because their children have had difficult experiences at school or have special needs and so on, and those parents are doing the most amazing and dedicated job in educating their children. The simple answer to the hon. Lady’s question regarding how this reform will help children who are not at school is that it will not because this is about lessons that happen in schools. Where children are able to be in school, we want them to be in school.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, and particularly for his reassurances that the primary responsibility for educating children in relationships, sex and health remains with parents. In the light of his answer to previous questions, will he reassure the House that there is no intention whatever in these guidelines to usurp or undermine the rights and responsibilities of parents to educate their children in these matters if that is what they choose to do?

Damian Hinds: I can confirm that. What schools do should complement what parents do, and I recognise that parents are in many ways the primary educators in these matters.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I welcome today’s announcement about specialist subjects and new learning, but constituents have come to me both applauding these changes and raising concerns. What will the Department be doing to bring parents alongside schools, so that they can assist in their children’s learning?

Damian Hinds: We want schools to work alongside parents, recognising that there are sensitivities to some areas of the subject matter. There is a requirement to consult parents and to publish the school’s policy on the internet. More broadly than that, we want schools to work alongside parents because this should be a collaborative effort.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): The issue of relationships and sex education is causing a huge amount of concern in my constituency. I took a delegation to meet Lord Agnew, who said that his Department set the direction but that the interpretation was being implemented by Ofsted. Now, there are some Members here who feel that the state knows better than parents themselves, but the last time I looked the Conservative party believed in freedom of choice and the freedom for people to decide their own future. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet a delegation of my constituents so that he can hear their concerns at first hand?

Damian Hinds: I am always happy to hear from my hon. Friend. I assure him that in this process I and colleagues have met representatives from a range of different viewpoints, including a range of different religious groups. There is a balance to be struck, and I think we have struck it. We get criticism from both sides—both from groups who think that this is too liberal and from groups who think that it is too restrictive—and the job of the Government is to try to get a good balance that respects that. Faith is also one of the protected characteristics, and it is right that we acknowledge that and absolutely have due respect for it. We need to make sure that as children are growing up and, sometimes, coming to terms with themselves and the world around them, we support them and make sure that they are equipped as they enter the adult world.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Well, I for one say hoo-bloody-rah—well done! I am absolutely proud of what the Government are doing, because in September 2010 I introduced a private Member’s Bill to this effect. It is just a shame that they have taken such a long time to get round to it. Seriously, though, I am delighted, not least because what passes on poverty in so many cases around the country is teenage pregnancy. A young girl who has a child before she is 15 or 16, apart from the legality of the situation, will end up having a child who grows up to be a teenage mum as well. All the evidence shows that really good sex and relationship education makes sure that children delay their first sexual experience, take fewer risks when they do so, and end up being better, more rounded, more fruitful, happier children. So hoo-bloody-rah!

Damian Hinds: I can only agree with the hon. Gentleman. I do not know if that is unparliamentary language or not, Mr Speaker, but I think we will let it go on this occasion.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I have had parents contact me over the weekend, ahead of the debate that is going on in Westminster Hall and the Secretary of State’s statement, saying that they would like to have the right to make sure that their children do not attend the relationships part of the proposals that he is suggesting. What is the Government’s response to my constituents on that?

Damian Hinds: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Our response is that there is a long-standing right to withdraw from sex education. We took the view that
that right should not be extended to relationships education, as Parliament also decided during the passage of the Children and Social Work Act 2017. It is important that every child has the opportunity to learn about and to discuss the different types of relationship there are in the world. That does not start with intimate relationships. It starts with sharing, taking turns and being kind to people, with an understanding about permission that then moves into discussing consent before getting on to some of these matters about intimate relationships. Obviously, schools do much of that anyway, but grounding the content for later years in school with regard to some of these basic building blocks is really important.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement. I strongly support the introduction of compulsory relationships education. It is vital that all young people grow up understanding and respecting the diversity of modern relationships and modern families. How will his Department monitor the delivery of these subjects to ensure that all children are taught effectively, including about LGBT issues, and that same-sex relationships are always presented in a positive and respectful way?

Damian Hinds: The hon. Lady raises an important point. Of course we expect schools to follow through on this. It is about core curriculum content, and schools do follow such guidance. It is also in scope for inspection by Ofsted, or aspects of it are, and by the Independent Schools Inspectorate—for example, through the way that inspectors look at pupils’ personal development, behaviour and welfare, and their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. As she will know, the Ofsted framework is a core part of the infrastructure around education.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the statement, not least because, when I was going through school, sex education was too much about the mechanics and not enough about respect, emotions and, ultimately, the key issue of consent. The 19-year-old guidance is flagrantly in need of updating. Will my right hon. Friend reassure me that the focus of what we are looking to do is not just about learning about the mechanics—sadly, too much of that can now be done online—but about the key components of what a relationship actually is, particularly respecting others and respecting yourself?

Damian Hinds: I give my hon. Friend the absolute assurance that that is at the heart of these proposals.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I welcome the statement and the measured way in which it has been imparted to Parliament. However, pursuant to the question of the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone), in what exceptional circumstances does the Secretary of State foresee headteachers overruling parents, aside from during the term prior to the age of consent?

Damian Hinds: As a matter of course, I would not expect headteachers to overrule parents. It is difficult to codify what those exceptional circumstances might be because, by definition, they would be exceptional. I make it clear that the intent of the guidance is to say that when a parent requests that their child be withdrawn from sex education, the request will ordinarily be granted up to three terms before the child reaches their 16th birthday, being the age of consent.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I, too, welcome these measures, which help to prepare our children for life in the complicated modern world. The hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) mentioned the menopause. The Secretary of State referred to menstrual wellbeing, and it is important that we include in that not only educating girls and boys about the start of menstrual life and the start of periods but what will happen at the end, because we know there is a shocking lack of awareness and information for women at that stage. Will he meet me to discuss this further and how it can be included in the curriculum and in the guidance for schools?

Damian Hinds: I am always pleased to meet my hon. Friend and to get her particularly expert view. There is a long list of things that we could include in this guidance, and we have already included a lot. We have tried to make sure that the guidance is quite comprehensive, but we have to set some limits.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Nearly 750 children across my borough of north-east Lincolnshire have been exposed to domestic violence in the past year, and it is essential that all children understand what constitutes a healthy relationship and recognise unduly coercive and violent behaviour so that they do not go on to repeat it. Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating North East Lincolnshire Council, Women’s Aid and the NSPCC on the work they do, day in and day out, in my constituency and across my borough in schools and family hubs to protect, inform and support Grimsby’s children and families?

Damian Hinds: I absolutely join the hon. Lady in commending those organisations. As she will recall, I had the opportunity some time ago to visit her constituency and to meet some of those involved in safeguarding children to hear about some of their strong and innovative work.

Ged Killen (Rotherglend and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome what the Secretary of State has said about LGBT education, but does he think there are any circumstances in which a school should be allowed not to teach that element of the curriculum? I went to a faith school, and I do not want to be flippant about the sensitivities, but having absolutely no LGBT sex and relationships education did not make me any less gay. Every child in every school has a right to that education.

Damian Hinds: We are clear on two things: these issues should be taken on in an age-appropriate way, but by the time a person reaches the end of their schooling, they should have covered them. We trust teachers and headteachers to make the decision about when to do that but not whether to do it.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for bringing forward these reforms, which I broadly welcome, particularly
the element of relationship advice and what constitutes a good relationship, but there is no doubt that this is concerning parents in my constituency—I have received a lot of correspondence on this. Clearly we need to get the balance right on our common shared values of understanding and tolerance, but can he give reassurance to parents who are concerned about modesty and appropriateness that the balance will be right and appropriate for the age group?

**Damian Hinds:** I too have received a lot of correspondence, and I understand that there are great sensitivities. I think it is true to say that there is no set of guidance on relationships and sex education we could come up with that everybody would be happy with, but we have tried to strike a balance. We have written it into the guidance that there needs to be consultation and co-operative working with parents, and through that, I hope parents will be more reassured. As the hon. Gentleman knows, we are a diverse society, and it is important that children growing up in it know about that diversity.

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**Trade Remedy Measures: UK Interests**

5.5 pm

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): As part of the Government’s preparations for leaving the European Union, the Department for International Trade has been determining which existing EU trade remedy measures should be transitioned once the UK operates its own independent trade policy. From the outset, in the October 2017 trade White Paper, the Government made a commitment to maintain those trade measures currently applied by the EU that matter to UK interests. The subsequent call for evidence published in November 2017 sought to establish which goods covered by EU anti-dumping and anti-subsidy duties are produced in the UK and whether UK production met the criteria to be transitioned. Provisional findings were published in July last year, with interested parties given further time over the summer to respond. Having completed their analysis of those responses, the Government will publish their final findings today.

Of 109 existing EU measures, we will maintain 43 where they are directly applicable to the UK and have met the criteria to be maintained. Those measures cover a wide range of goods, from ironing boards to aluminium foil, to ensure continued protection from known unfair trading practices for important industries such as steel and ceramics. The measures will be in place and take effect from either 29 March, in the event of a no-deal UK exit from the EU, or at the end of the implementation period with the EU. That will also apply to any definitive safeguard measures that are in place on exit either on 29 March or at the end of an implementation period.

At the same time, the UK will not transition the remaining 66 EU measures that currently apply, because the measures did not meet our criteria as set out in the call for evidence. I remind the House that those criteria were: first, that the Department received an application from UK businesses; secondly, that the application was supported by a sufficient proportion of the UK businesses that produce those products; and thirdly, that the market share of the UK businesses that produce those products is at least 1%.

This is not about picking favourites. As I said previously, we will provide UK industry with a level playing field, enabling businesses to trade fairly with their international competitors. As I just set out, our decision about whether to maintain measures was based on whether those measures mattered to the UK. We cannot, for example, transition measures where there is no UK production, as that is not compliant with our World Trade Organisation obligations, nor is it in the UK’s wider economic interests. Where measures are not transitioned, that will reduce costs for UK users of these products, lead to lower prices for UK consumers and benefit related industries such as food and construction. To provide just a couple of examples across different sectors, the final findings will see the removal of a 34% tariff on imports of solar glass from China, which is used to produce solar panels, and a 10% tariff reduction on imported sweetcorn from Thailand. This is just one of the benefits of the UK being able to operate its own independent trade policy, tailored to the specific needs of our people, businesses and communities.

The European Union has recently imposed safeguards on several categories of steel products in the form of tariff rate quotas. Safeguards can be used to protect domestic industry from surges in imports. They act as a safety valve and provide industry with some breathing space to adjust to increased imports. Under WTO rules, safeguards can only be used if unforeseen surges in imports are causing serious injury or there is a threat of serious injury to domestic industry. The Department for International Trade is working to ensure that these safeguards can be transitioned effectively, including setting the tariff rate quotas at an appropriate level for the UK market and reviewing the product scope, so that the safeguards only cover steel products made in the UK. I will be in a position to update the House on that shortly.

Turning back to the transition of anti-dumping and anti-subsidy measures, all transitioned measures will be maintained at the same level set previously by the European Commission until the UK Trade Remedies Authority completes a full review. This approach is a clear departure from our WTO partners’ commitment to a rules-based international trading system. The Trade Remedies Authority review will decide whether transitioned trade remedy measures should continue, and if so, at what level. It is designed to ensure that all interested parties have the opportunity to take part.

Once complete, the resulting measures will fully reflect the UK market situation based on UK-specific market data. The reviews will include an assessment of the risk of dumping or of subsidy recurring if measures are removed, an analysis of injury to UK producers and an assessment against the UK economic interest test. While the time taken for each review and their timing will be a matter for the Trade Remedies Authority to determine, we anticipate each review will take between 12 and 18 months to complete. I would very much like to thank the MPs from across the House who responded to the consultation process and those who made strong representations on behalf of specific interests in their constituencies.

As the House will know, work to establish the Trade Remedies Authority itself is well advanced, with over 80% of staff appointed. As I set out in my letter of 14 February to the International Trade Committee, in the event that the Trade Bill does not receive Royal Assent until shortly after exit day, I have prepared contingency options to ensure that we can deliver a fully operational trade remedy system. This contingency plan means that, until the Trade Remedies Authority is legally established, the staff recruited to and trained for that body can instead carry out their functions as part of the Department for International Trade. Once the Trade Bill receives Royal Assent, the drafting of the contingency regulations is such that trade remedy functions will immediately revert to the Trade Remedies Authority as a non-departmental public body. I intend to lay the secondary legislation giving effect to this option shortly. This will enable staff to begin reviews of transition measures. As far as possible, they will follow the same procedures as those that will apply once the Trade Remedies Authority is finally established.

Whatever the outcome of our negotiation with the European Union, UK industries can be confident that we are taking the necessary steps to ensure we are able to operate our own independent trade remedies framework, avoid exposing them to known unfair trade practices and maintain the existing trade remedies measures that matter to their interests. We are of course committed to ensuring that UK industries receive the protection they need, but I am absolutely aware that trade remedies measures can increase the cost of affected products for user industries and consumers, as well as the competitiveness of both user and producer industries. That is why the principles we have set out for our trade remedy system include the need for proportionality. The system we are introducing ensures appropriate account will be taken of the impacts on users and consumers and on the wider trade agenda. I commend this statement to the House.

5.12 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of the statement today. He is right of course that, as we transition, we will need to have our own trade remedies in place. In his response, he may play fast and loose with our opposition to the Trade Bill, but he will know that our opposition was principled on the basis that we disagreed with many of the measures contained therein. We do, none the less, need to have measures in place.

We are just five weeks away from leaving the UK and possibly operating our own trade remedies, yet the Trade Bill, which establishes the Trade Remedies Authority, is still stuck in the other place due to the Government’s refusal to set out a transparent and democratic approach to trade agreements. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the Manufacturing Trade Remedies Alliance’s suggestion is correct that it would have been possible to maintain the existing EU remedies until they came up for review? Indeed, if he accepted my party’s proposal for a customs union, he would ensure the continuity of trade remedies and that EU safeguard measures would not apply to British exports.

However, the Secretary of State has proceeded, as he wants, to fast-track the UK into the sort of less regulated economy he has always favoured. Rather than preserving to maintain trade remedies and maintain the status quo, so eager is he to begin cutting tariffs and opening up UK markets to cheaper imports that the Government have decided to presume that all such measures will be terminated, unless a case is made to maintain them. Such measures will undoubtedly increase the volume of imports on UK markets at less than fair market cost. After all, that is why the trade remedy measures were imposed in the first instance, following lengthy investigations by the EU. Indeed, at a time when the Department has faced repeated criticism about Brexit preparedness and priorities, when the Secretary of State has failed to bring forward the Trade Bill, when he has failed to discuss the 40 trade agreements that he promised would be ready “one second after midnight” after Brexit, and when the Government have failed to present a workable Brexit deal, why did he choose to ignore the MTRA?

The Government have failed to produce coherent evidence for these policy decisions; nor have they carried out an impact assessment. Indeed, many will be concerned that today’s findings are little more than policy-based evidence to support the Secretary of State’s free trade quest.
The Government’s handling of Brexit has been absolutely chaotic, no more so than in the extraordinary approach taken to delivering the UK’s trade policy. Any claims that the Government are acting in the interests of British business in ensuring continuity of trade on existing terms completely fall apart in the face of the evidence. The Secretary of State is chasing trade agreements with his gold tier friends across the Anglosphere and prioritising efforts to liberalise UK markets as part of his free trade experiment. In carrying out this consultation, the Government have refused to consider evidence from trade unions and civil society groups, instead only accepting arguments presented by a producer or group of producers who collectively meet what originally was an unspecified volume of production and/or who had an unspecified market share in those goods.

The Government’s intended agenda is clear. While they have explicitly stated that only evidence submitted from producers may be considered in the determination of the continuation of an existing measure, they have welcomed the views of downstream producers and consumer interest groups. That further compounds the concerns of our producers that the Government’s primary objective is cheaper prices, no matter how that might decimate manufacturing in the country. If people lose their jobs, cheaper prices will be of scant consolation.

There have also been recent reports that the Secretary of State wishes unilaterally to reduce all tariffs to zero in the event of a no-deal Brexit—a move that has been met with alarm and shock by our producing industries and which I detailed extensively in our debate last Thursday. Unfortunately the Secretary of State has refused to confirm that he has abandoned that folly. On zero tariffs, there has been no comprehensive formal consultation, no comprehensive impact assessment and no prolonged transition proposed. Such a significant decision would have far-reaching consequences for the UK economy and would demand full parliamentary scrutiny.

This Government have long stood against the interests of our producers and the jobs they maintain in our heartlands—from the Potteries to the valleys. The UK Government have repeatedly blocked efforts by the European Union to reform trade defence measures and, through the establishment of the Trade Remedies Authority, have taken a substantially different approach from the existing EU regime. The EU has since modernised those measures, as the UK no longer participates in those consultations. They may be reduced by what we are doing. We have spoken to those who produce these products, but we have spoken to those who are involved further downstream and whose costs may be reduced by what we are doing. We have spoken to trade associations, in particular UK Steel and the British Ceramic Confederation. We have had bilaterals, roundtables and technical meetings. We have written to the UK Steel Association and the British Ceramic Confederation. We have had discussions with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. We have spoken to those who collectively meet what originally was an unspecified volume of production and/or who had an unspecified market share in those goods.

The concerns of our producing industries are manifold. How will reviews of the maintained trade remedies be conducted? In determining the UK’s approach, will the Secretary of State accept the findings of any separate EU review? Will he accept evidence submitted by producers in respect of ongoing reviews or investigations by the EU as qualifying for automatic inclusion in any subsequent review or investigation to be carried out by the UK? What analysis has his Department carried out in respect of the impact of terminating trade remedy measures, and what assessment has it made of the unilateral reduction of trade tariffs to zero?

Dr Fox: We got there just before Brexit, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The hon. Gentleman did not say very much about trade remedies, so there is very little to respond to. In fact, it is a great example of “If you haven’t got anything to say, don’t say anything”. The Government’s policy is quite clearly correct and is supported by what he calls producers but I call employers. I know it was a slip of the tongue and that he did not mean that his policy is to leave the UK—I am sure that is the policy of the SNP.

The hon. Gentleman says that I want a less regulated economy. Yes, of course I want a less regulated economy, but it is against the rules of the WTO to impose regulations and trade remedies where there is no UK production or where we do not meet the threshold. Is he actually suggesting that we maintain remedies where there is no UK business and industry to protect, to the detriment of our consumers who will pay higher prices without protecting anything in the UK itself?

The hon. Gentleman talks as though cheaper prices are somehow a bad thing. I would love to see an improvement in the disposable income of people across all income ranges. If we can do that by removing tariffs—which are effectively taxes—by procedures such as this, we should be willing to do so. In fact, this is one of the real advantages of our ability to leave the European Union—to set our own tariffs.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the Trade Bill. Report stage in the House of Lords will be on Monday 4 March. He does not seem to understand the consultation we have had. We have engaged widely with stakeholders. He said correctly that we have spoken to those who produce these products, but we have spoken to those who are involved further downstream and whose costs may be reduced by what we are doing. We have spoken to trade associations, in particular UK Steel and the British Ceramic Confederation. We have had bilaterals, roundtables and technical meetings. We have written to all MPs twice, which one would have thought covered a very wide range of consultation if MPs are doing what they should be doing in their constituencies.

On the European Union, if we go into an implementation period, all trade remedies will be rolled over and we will adopt any new European trade remedies during that period.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): An excellent statement with a good balance: protecting our industries against dumping where needed, but giving our customers more choice and lower prices where we do not have an industrial interest. Will my right hon. Friend promise me that those same excellent principles will be applied when he sets out our full tariff schedule, where I hope, for example, we will have zero tariffs on imported components to give a really big boost to British industry?

Dr Fox: The Treasury will bring forward the appropriate statutory instruments relating to that soon.
Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): In evidence given about the formation of the TRA, the Law Society of Scotland said:

“it is important that any assessment of impact of particular trade measures takes into account a wide range of stakeholder interests. This should involve balancing the interests of producers and consumers, which may sometimes be directly opposed, as well as consideration of the wider public interest.”

That, of course, means consideration of measures such as the anti-dumping and subsidy measures that were in the provisional report published last July.

The methodology for determining whether measures would be maintained or rescinded, again published last July, included a great deal about production—supporting firms’ production, total domestic production, opposing firms’ production—and a great deal about the market, UK firms’ domestic sales and total domestic sales including imports. Those who have solely producer metrics are in the tables that were published last July—the producer application received, the support threshold met, the market share threshold met—and that led to some apparently contradictory decisions. Restraining bar from Belarus would have its measures terminated, but restraining bar from China would have its measures maintained. Tubes and pipes of ductile cast iron from India would be terminated, but welded tubes and pipes of iron or non-alloy steel from Belarus would be maintained. There were contradictions in what were apparently similar items.

May I therefore ask the Secretary of State—I know the updated version will be published soon—why was no weight given to the consumer interest explicitly? Why was no weight given to the wider public interest explicitly? Why do those outcomes seem so arbitrary for what would appear at face value to be similar products?

Dr Fox: Our intention is to maintain protection where there is a case to protect British businesses from unfair trading practices. We have looked at the evidence that the EU put in place to have these remedies in the first place and we think there is a suitable case for doing it. The hon. Gentleman asked me a very specific question about rebar steel. The reason that we have maintained measures on China and terminated measures in other cases is because no producer interest was expressed. They made no application for that to happen during the call for evidence and therefore, it did not fall within the criteria that we set out for the consultation and which I reiterated in my statement.

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for the extensive consultation that he has carried out with both industry and Members of this House. Will he confirm, for the 43 EU remedy measures that we are maintaining, that none of the less, his new Trade Remedies Authority will, during the implementation period, be able to start to review those measures to ensure that consumers are not paying any higher prices for goods than strictly necessary?

Dr Fox: I can confirm that and, as I said, we will want to use British market-sensitive data to do that. At all times, we want to maintain the correct level of protection so that our businesses are not subject to unfair trading practices such as subsidies and dumping, but at the same time, we want to ensure that where we can reduce tariffs and therefore prices for consumers without in any way reducing the protection of British business, we will be able to do so. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) said, it is a subtle, but important balance.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State please explain to the House why the Trade Bill is taking so long to gain Royal Assent? Will he also list which trade unions he has included in his consultation on the trade remedies strategy?

Dr Fox: As I said, the Trade Bill will be on Report in the House of Lords next week. I hope that the Opposition will ensure that it can pass into law as quickly as possible—the Government will certainly not impede it. I cannot tell the hon. Lady which specific trade unions were involved, but I shall write to her with a response.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I listened very carefully to the question/statement that the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), made, and he sounded so not in favour of the Trade Bill that it was rather worrying. May I ask the Secretary of State what would happen to those protections if the Trade Bill were thwarted somehow by the Opposition?

Dr Fox: As I said in my statement, if we are unable to get the Trade Bill through, which provides legal underpinning of the TRA, we will use mechanisms under the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Act 2018, but I would want to see the Trade Bill go through as soon as possible, because it gives us the best possible legal underpinnings for the mechanisms that we are putting in place.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Ind): When we talk sometimes about national security, we think about military and defensive measures. This is about our economic security and businesses that are potentially under threat of being undercut by unfair subsidies from China or elsewhere, putting our workforce and their livelihoods on the line. Will the Secretary of State give us an absolute guarantee that our economic security is not going to be weakened after 29 March? It is clear that the haphazard way in which he has not managed to give the Trade Remedies Authority a proper, legal basis yet makes this look as though it is all held together by a box of matches and sticky-back plastic. We need strong defences for our country and surely that has to include strong economic defences as well.

Dr Fox: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. We do need to look after our economic interests, which is why we need a Trade Remedies Authority that is able to put these trade remedies in place and review them. We did not vote against the establishment of the Trade Remedies Authority; the Opposition parties did so by voting against the Trade Bill in what would otherwise be an act of economic vandalism, were we not stepping in to ensure that businesses such as steel and ceramics are properly protected.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What is it about ironing boards?

Dr Fox: Like all the other elements that I mentioned, they in one way or another provide jobs for people in the United Kingdom, and the Government will ensure
that industries whether large or small are given the appropriate protection from unfair trading from overseas.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): When does the Secretary of State expect the Trade Remedies Authority to be established, and what additional costs will be incurred before it is?

**Dr Fox:** It is impossible to give a date. The right hon. Gentleman’s colleagues in the other place, who have been so holding up the Trade Bill, have more effect on the date than I do. He might want to have a word with them.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his statement. Its value for both business and consumers is plain. Does he agree that it underpins the importance of ensuring that we do not have a forever customs union of the sort that has been highlighted as a very bad thing, inter alia, by the Leader of the Opposition?

**Dr Fox:** Were we to have a customs union, we would forever have to apply to the UK the trade remedies decided by the European Union, which might apply remedies to areas where there is no production in the United Kingdom, carrying a cost for our consumers but no benefit to our producers. That would seem to me to be one of the strongest arguments for leaving in the first place.

**Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State and the House will be aware that trade remedies can equally be imposed against the UK. He will also be aware that in the event of a no-deal Brexit we are likely to see—according to the British Retail Consortium—trade measures linked to WTO tariffs and new regulatory checks hit the cost of sourcing food from overseas by up to 40%. Given that his Trade Remedies Authority is not likely to be able to do anything about that, would it not be a good time for him to announce that he will join other Cabinet Ministers in insisting that the Prime Minister takes a no-deal Brexit off the table this week?

**Dr Fox:** There were several completely different issues in that question. I think that the hon. Gentleman is to some extent confusing the issue of most favoured nation day-one tariffs with the tariffs that come from trade remedies. No remedies could be applied to the United Kingdom unless we were in breach of WTO rules on subsidies and dumping. I assure him that under a Conservative Government that is simply not going to happen.

**Mark Garnier** (Wyre Forest) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. Trade remedies are an incredibly important measure for the protection of British industries, but they should not be used as protectionism. Can I urge my right hon. Friend that as we move forward as an independent nation free of the European Union we use our seat on the World Trade Organisation to highlight and champion the cause of free trade around the world?

**Dr Fox:** Like my hon. Friend, I am, I would like to think, a great champion of free trade, but that does not mean a free-for-all. There have to be rules to ensure that there is fair trade in the global trading system. That means that those countries that purposely overproduce, dump and subsidise, and are therefore not part of a fair trading system, should be penalised for doing so.

**Hywel Williams** (Arfon) (PC): Some 9,000 jobs in Wales depend on the steel industry. Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie), some steel products figure in the list of 43 measures to be maintained, but others appear in the 66 measures to be terminated. Will the Secretary of State give an absolute guarantee that the measures to be terminated will not lead to steel jobs being terminated in Wales?

**Dr Fox:** I am encouraged by the reaction of UK Steel, who very much welcome the Government’s measures. In a very small number, such as rebar, we have maintained the remedy, where the industry itself has said that it wants to and it meets the threshold: we have not done so where there is either no production in the UK or there has been no representation from any UK producer that we should carry forward such a remedy.

**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): As my right hon. Friend knows, the steel industry is vital for Corby. Can he say a little more about what these developments today mean for the steel industry in this country and for my constituents in particular?

**Dr Fox:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his constant support for, and defence of, steel interests in his constituency and elsewhere. Today we are setting out to show the industry that we will continue to provide the same level of protection, and the same remedies at the same level, to which it has become used in the European Union, and for the same reasons. Those remedies are in place because there has been very unfair treatment in the global steel industry, especially in the form of overproduction, subsidy and dumping. We will ensure that the British steel industry is never subjected to those pressures.

**James Cleverly** (Brantree) (Con): My right hon. Friend mentioned this in his statement, but will he give a more explicit commitment that under a Conservative Government we will always seek to drive down tariff barriers where that is possible—and drive down prices for consumers—while protecting the industries in the United Kingdom from unfair and distorted competition from overseas?

**Dr Fox:** Wherever we can bring down prices to make the disposable incomes of people throughout the United Kingdom go further, we will do so. That is a sound Conservative principle. We will also cut tariffs where we can do so without any potential disruption or disbenefit to UK business and industry, because tariffs are taxes. We are able to take those measures today because we will no longer have to apply remedies—that is, taxes—to the UK in areas where there is no UK production, but there is currently EU production. It is an act of economic liberation.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): The Trade Remedies Authority sounds like a good idea, but it is a quango. It used to be a “sound Conservative principle” that we would reduce the number of quangos. I think it was our policy at one time that for every new quango introduced, two would be abolished. Before the authority is formally, officially established, will the Secretary of State identify two quangos that will get the chop?
Dr Fox: Given the short time for which my Department has existed, we have not yet developed such bodies. I will convey my hon. Friends representations loudly and clearly to my departmental colleagues, but I must say to him that the Trade Remedies Authority is necessary for the protection of key British businesses and the application of international trade law. If we cannot get the Trade Bill through on time, I will take contingency measures to ensure that those protections are given to British businesses, and that international trade law is upheld.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The Secretary of State will be aware of Torbay’s vibrant photonics industry, which manufactures and exports particularly to the United States. I welcome the continuing commitment to protecting industries in which there is production, but does he agree that it would make absolutely no sense to go on protecting industries that do not exist in this country, which would merely drive up prices for consumers?

Dr Fox: I find it bizarre that what I interpret as the position of the Labour Front Bench today is to maintain trade remedies where there is no UK producer interest. It does not comply with WTO law, but even if it did, it would make no economic sense whatsoever to apply increased cost to the United Kingdom unnecessarily. I think that that shows how utterly confused, and confusing, Labour’s policy in this area is.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement, and particularly for his reference to the ceramics industry. Does he agree that it is essential for the ceramics industry in Stoke-on-Trent that we maintain the level playing field in trade against those unfair practices, and prevent those who want to flood the UK market with low-value goods from doing so and threatening British manufacturers?

Dr Fox: One of the reasons I looked forward to making my statement was that I would be protected from the persistent but not unwelcome badgering of my hon. Friend about ceramics in his constituency. In recent months, he has made the point forcefully and frequently in every corner of the building in Whitehall. Yes, I do agree with him: while we want our imports to fall given the cost to consumers, protection is necessary when countries are following policies that are designed to undermine the concepts of international trading law. We will resist those. We are rolling over the protections for the ceramics industry today because it is very vulnerable to the practices of dumping, overproduction and subsidy which we so deprecate.
BILL PRESENTED

PLASTIC POLLUTION

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr Alistair Carmichael, supported by Anna McMorrin, Scott Mann, Alex Sobel, Caroline Lucas, Layla Moran, Tim Farron, Mary Creagh, Zac Goldsmith, Ben Lake, Dr Matthew Offord and Kerry McCarthy presented a Bill to set targets for the reduction of plastic pollution; to require the Secretary of State to publish a strategy and annual reports on plastic pollution reduction; to establish an advisory committee on plastic pollution; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 March, and to be printed (Bill 339).

Exiting the EU (Financial Services)

5.43 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

I beg to move,

That the draft Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.

The Treasury has been undertaking a programme of legislation to ensure that, if the UK leaves the EU without a deal or an implementation period, there continues to be a functioning legislative and regulatory regime for financial services in the UK. The statutory instrument being debated today will fix deficiencies in the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000, commonly referred to as FSMA, and subordinate legislation made under FSMA, which are an important part of the UK’s regulatory framework for financial services.

A key function of this legislation is to define the “regulatory perimeter” that sets out the activities and financial institutions that are in scope of UK financial services regulation. In a no-deal scenario, the UK would be outside the EU’s supervisory and regulatory framework, resulting in deficiencies in the existing legislation. Specifically, many provisions in the legislation set the scope of regulated activities based on firms being authorised and operating across the single market, or by referring to definitions in EU law, which will no longer be workable after exit.

As Members will be aware, the EEA Passport Rights (Amendment, etc., and Transitional Provisions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which Parliament has approved, begin the process of removing legislative provisions that facilitate passporting in the UK, as well as providing for a temporary permissions regime allowing EEA firms to continue their activities for a limited period after exit day, giving them time to become UK-authorised.

While the SI being debated today does not alter the underlying policy of the UK’s legislative framework for financial services, many of the proposed changes in it are necessary to complete the task of removing passporting-related provisions and to define the UK’s regulatory perimeter as a regime operating outside the EU. Many of the definitions of regulated activities in FSMA, and in the Regulated Activities Order 2001 made under FSMA, include the EEA in their scope and rely on definitions in EU law to operate. To reflect the UK’s new position outside the EU, the SI will amend the territorial scope of those definitions where needed, so that they apply only to the UK after exit.

As well as setting the general regulatory perimeter, FSMA and subordinate legislation contain some specific provisions that are important to the UK’s regulatory regime. For example, provisions in FSMA specify certain important functions for which authorised firms must obtain approval from the Financial Conduct Authority or the Prudential Regulation Authority, under either the approved persons regime or the senior managers and certification regime. FSMA currently exempts EEA firms from elements of those UK conduct regimes, which would no longer be safe or appropriate once the UK is outside the EU’s single market. The SI therefore removes this exemption for EEA firms.

Some of the changes proposed in this SI are also necessary to ensure that UK regulators can continue to carry out their statutory functions. As I have mentioned,
this SI will complete the process of removing passporting-related provisions. This will mean that some firms and fund managers may face new requirements as result of these necessary changes. The SI therefore creates some transitional arrangements to mitigate disruption to those EEA firms and their consumers. For example, some of these transitional provisions relate to certain financial instruments, financial documents or contracts that have been issued or entered into pre-exit, ensuring that they continue to operate effectively after exit for an appropriate period.

Even with the specific transitional arrangements we are making in this and other onshoring SIs, firms will still be faced with a large volume of regulatory changes that they will need to adapt to in a no-deal scenario. This could cause significant disruption to the financial services sector and consumers immediately after exit, and firms will need more time to adjust to these new requirements. To prepare for this scenario, this SI creates a temporary transitional power that allows the UK regulators to defer or modify changed requirements for firms.

This temporary power is designed to replicate the adjustment time that firms would have if the implementation period in the proposed withdrawal agreement were ratified. For that reason, the temporary transitional power would be available for two years from exit day. Any directions made under the transitional power would therefore expire at the end of that two-year period, after which firms would have to comply with all new requirements in legislation. The UK regulators are best placed to decide how to phase in onshoring regulatory changes, working with the firms they supervise and using their supervisory judgment. I am particularly grateful to the members of the Treasury Committee, who took the time to scrutinise this temporary transitional power in the recent hearing that took place on 29 January. I am pleased that the Committee acknowledged the need for the temporary power, with the Chair concluding that “although this is unprecedented, these powers are needed in order to make sure our financial services sector works, whatever might happen”.

The Treasury has been working closely with the regulators in the drafting of this SI. It has also engaged industry on the SI through a cross-sectoral working group with representatives of the financial services sector. That group is chaired by TheCityUK and has representation from a number of different trade associations and law firms. Industry has expressed support for the provisions in this SI and welcomed the proposed transitional arrangements as prudent and pragmatic.

Before I conclude, I would like to draw the House’s attention to two minor mistakes that have been discovered in the SI and the explanatory memorandum that accompanied it. Unfortunately, mistakes do happen from time to time, and where they are found it is important that an explanation is put on the record. Shortly after the SI was laid, a small typographical error was discovered in regulation 202(2)(a); it refers to the “Prudential Regulatory Authority”, whereas of course it should read the “Prudential Regulation Authority”. A correction slip will shortly be made to put that right.

In preparation for this debate, a minor inaccuracy was discovered in paragraph 2.55 of the explanatory memorandum. This SI removes the exemption from the requirement for a financial prospectus to be approved by the Financial Conduct Authority if it has been approved in another European economic area state. This amendment is correctly explained in paragraph 2.55, but the paragraph also says that the SI makes transitional provision for prospectuses approved by an EEA regulator before exit day. Although there will be such a transitional provision, it is not made in this SI; it is made in the Official Listing of Securities, Prospectus and Transparency (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were debated in the other place on 18 February and in this House on 19 February. I apologise for the mistake, but hope the House will agree that this is a very minor mistake that does not alter the substance of the explanation provided in the explanatory memorandum. However, I will be re-laying the explanatory memorandum to ensure that the mistake is corrected.

In summary, the Government believe that the proposed legislation is necessary to ensure that there is a functioning legislative framework for financial services regulation in the UK after exit.

5.51 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to be here today and to have the opportunity to speak on these important provisions. Of course this is not the first time that I have sat across from the Minister—mainly in Committee Rooms—to discuss delegated legislation relating to no-deal provisions for financial instruments, but I am pleased that at least this debate is taking place in the Chamber.

I am grateful to the Chair of the Treasury Committee, the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nick Morgan), for writing to the Leader of the House and the Economic Secretary to the Treasury to help secure this debate. It will not come as a surprise to Members that I robustly agree with the points she made in her letter about why this instrument merits a debate on the Floor of the House, given, as she says, “the wide-reaching scope of powers that are being provided to the regulators.”

The Opposition made the same point in their request for a debate on the Floor of the House on the markets in financial instruments directive—MiFID—SI back in November. MiFID is a cornerstone of the regulatory architecture of UK capital markets, numbering tens of thousands of pages and enshrining important retail market protections. Yet that request was denied, and the Opposition made very clear at the time their objections and their concerns about the democratic implications of that. So although I am pleased that we now have the opportunity to participate in a wider debate about another significant item of regulation, it is not before time, and I wish that the Government had heeded our calls earlier.

We are now three months on from that MiFID SI and, thus, significantly closer to the potential reality that these items of legislation may end up on the statute book. We are now barely one month away from 29 March, yet we are still without a ratified EU exit deal. Therefore it is more important than ever that this legislation is properly scrutinised, as, unfortunately, the likelihood that it might be used increases. Tomorrow, myself and a number of colleagues currently in the Chamber will discuss the Financial Services (Implementation of Legislation) Bill in the Public Bill Committee. That Bill
handles the EU regulations currently in train that will be implemented over the next two years. It worries the Opposition deeply that we are entering into a patchwork of regulations on financial services. We have seen dozens of SIs that allocate new powers to different institutions, including the FCA, the PRA, the Bank of England and the Treasury, yet we have no central means of assessing those new powers and what they look like in the round. Instead, they must be pieced together across different items of legislation, which is extremely challenging from a scrutiny perspective and risks clashes and inconsistencies. Should we crash out without a deal, it will be even more difficult, given the overall context, to keep track of which body was empowered to do what and for how long.

That is especially relevant when it comes to the instrument we are discussing today. The Financial Services and Markets Act 2000, like MiFID, is a sprawling piece of financial regulation that touches on many different areas of the market. It therefore impacts significantly on the powers that regulators will need to take on functions from the EU. It also interacts in several different ways with the overall programme of no-deal secondary legislation, most notably with the temporary permissions regime, as the Minister acknowledged. So, first, may I ask him to clarify why this instrument has been scheduled quite so late in the process, when we are just a month away from exit? What financial institutions require at this point more than anything is certainty. Leaving such a large chunk of UK markets until the eleventh hour seems as though it will place unnecessary stress on UK financial services firms, given that policies such as the temporary permissions regime were determined earlier in the process, in recognition of the time they would need to be implemented. The Treasury’s own estimate, in its impact assessment, of the number of firms that will need to familiarise themselves with this instrument, is 59,200. So this is significant pressure to place on a large number of firms so close to exit day, especially as the instrument outlines conditions that must be met by exit day.

For example, the instrument stipulates new rules for firms that are already in the process of making a part 7 insurance transfer between UK and EEA entities, with onshoring legislation introducing a savings provisions in relation to insurance business transfer schemes. But for it to be available in the two years following exit—as the Minister rightly said, to shadow the approach that would have been taken if we had a proper implementation period—an independent expert required for the transfer must have been appointed by exit day and a transaction fee must have been paid to the PRA. Can the Minister confidently say that firms that are impacted are aware of this and will have sufficient time to carry it out, given how close we are to exit day?

The Opposition’s other concern is the sweeping bestowing of yet more powers on to the regulator, without sufficient checks and balances. We have repeated our issues with that on numerous occasions in Committee. Although we have been told by the Government that these instruments do not represent policy judgments, in our view deciding where to allocate powers, along with their extent and duration, is intrinsically a policy judgment. Simply substituting the FCA for the European Securities and Markets Authority, and the Treasury for the European Commission, is not a straight swap. The two European institutions interact in a different way from the FCA and Treasury, with different checks and balances. These issues need proper discussion and scrutiny.

The impact assessment provided by the Treasury for this Bill maps out how regulators will be able to execute these new powers. It states that “to apply the power, the relevant regulator will need to make a ‘direction’ which should be brought to the attention of the affected firm or group of firms. Before making a direction, the regulator will need to consult other regulators where the other regulator’s functions may be affected by the direction. The regulator will also need to consult HM Treasury. Directions will be published by the regulators unless doing so would adversely affect their statutory objectives.”

So we have here a mapping out of the intra-regulatory consultation, but where is the wider consultation that will take place with the affected firms and other stakeholders before proceeding? We are informed about this being “brought to the attention” of these bodies, not about a consultation. The Minister’s comments on that were slightly vague. He was talking about the whole package of financial services legislation, rather than about this specific aspect. Our concern is that this sounds like a power to make regulations simply via public notice, with limited accountability and recourse.

I am grateful for the time the Minister and his team have taken to brief me throughout this process. Nevertheless, we would be failing in our duty as the Opposition if we did not highlight our serious concerns about the use of the SI process to prepare us in this way. Some colleagues here today will have heard us list those objections in Committee previously, but to reiterate: we believe the SI process to prepare us in this way. Some colleagues here today will have heard us list those objections in Committee previously, but to reiterate: we believe the magnitude and volume of changes proposed should have been consolidated into one piece of primary legislation that could have been better scrutinised. Indeed, at the session last week in the other place on subordinate legislation transparency and accountability, the Conservative peer Lord Lexden voiced the Committee’s concerns about the number of drafting errors in instruments. That is surely an indication that the scale of this project was too large.

I must praise the Minister’s candour in acknowledging that there were drafting mistakes in this SI. As he knows—he has kindly taken on board this fact—I have identified a drafting error in one of the SIs that was presented to us. I do not believe this is the Minister’s fault, nor do I believe it is the fault of his civil servants, who are working enormously hard on this package of legislation. It is, however, an indicator of the fact that those who believe it is the fault of his civil servants, who are working enormously hard on this package of legislation. It is, however, an indicator of the fact that those who believe that preparations for no deal can be simple are kidding themselves and do not understand the magnitude of the task. We simply do not understand what issues we may be storing up for the future, especially as the consequences of a no-deal Brexit, in which this legislation would be used, are so hard to predict. I can only hope that we do not find out. The Opposition will do everything in our power to prevent a no-deal outcome, despite the Prime Minister’s reckless running down of the clock by postponing the meaningful vote yet again just yesterday.

6 pm

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I thank the Minister for coming to the Treasury Committee to give evidence at the end of January, and the chief executives of the Prudential Regulation Authority and the Financial Conduct Authority, who sat alongside him and also gave evidence.
I am grateful that, as the shadow Minister said, the Leader of the House listened to the Committee’s request that this SI should be debated on the Floor of the House, because it offers unprecedented powers, for understandable reasons. That is why I and Committee members understand and will support the powers sought in this SI, but it is right that they should be scrutinised. Continuity of business is important for our financial services sector. The impact assessments for this and similar statutory instruments make clear the enormous contribution that the financial services sector makes to this country and the huge amount that it pays in tax revenue, which is important for funding our public services, but our financial services sector also puts the UK very much on the global map.

The Minister, who was perhaps left with no choice, and the chief executives have generously said that they are willing to come back to the Committee, should the powers be needed and we have further questions about how they are used in future. However, we all hope that this SI will not be needed, because it is for a no-deal scenario, and we all hope very much that the Prime Minister is successful in negotiating a withdrawal agreement with the European Union.

I want to concentrate on two areas this afternoon. The first is the duration of the new powers. The shadow Minister rightly said that, because of the timescales and the complexity, what is being created feels like a patchwork of legislation, some of which will be needed in one scenario and some in another. That might be challenging for Members of Parliament and for Ministers and shadow Ministers, but the people we should really be thinking about are the businesses that will have to try to follow the new legislation, which sets out the new powers. The Committee has noted that the no-deal statutory instruments relating to financial services seem to have different durations, creating cliff edges at different times. Would it not be easier for the businesses—those that will have to rely on this secondary legislation—and other interested parties if the Government provided the regulators with additional powers in a no-deal scenario that had a consistent duration, to minimise multiple cliff edges throughout the negotiations that will take place in the coming years?

Let me turn to the impact assessments for regulations such as this, which I think have been subject to some debate upstairs in various Committee Rooms. The Treasury has provided impact assessments, and there seem to be two types of costs: familiarisation costs for most businesses, which have to read the regulations and understand them, and implementation costs for business that have to modify their business practices. The assessment calculates that this statutory instrument will cost each firm £1,900. That calculation appears to be based on the number of words used in the instrument, with a cost across the industry of £110 million, which suggests that 57,000 to 58,000 firms—the shadow Minister mentioned 59,000—will be affected.

I speak as a former lawyer. Words were important and often, it would be fair to say, we tried to use as many as possible. The number of words used is an interesting way of measuring the impact of regulations made through secondary legislation. I do not know whether the Minister wants to say something about that now—it has been covered in debate elsewhere—but I would ask him whether that is the right way to proceed.

Secondly, the Government have been unable to put a monetary value on the cost to businesses of complying with the statutory instrument. The Minister rightly said that he has worked with industry to ensure that the new powers are what the industry needs to provide continuity—I know he has done that, because I have had feedback from different financial services firms—but has he asked the affected firms of different sizes what they estimate their compliance costs will be? Would that not be a pragmatic approach to calculating the costs of compliance—the cost of advice that firms will need to take and the amount that they might have to spend to change their internal rulebooks and guidance and the guidance provided to clients?

We live in extraordinary times. This is an unprecedented situation, where all sorts of hyperbole can be used. As I have said, granting these powers to the regulators makes enormous sense for the continuity of a very important part of our business sector. I wish that the Government had produced a proper White Paper about their plans for financial services, as I asked them to well over a year ago. Right hon. and hon. Members in all parts of the House will understand why the Government are asking for these powers. However, while I have no reason to think that this Minister does not welcome scrutiny—I think he has appeared before our Committee more than any of his colleagues—he and other Ministers should expect continued rigorous scrutiny by the Treasury Committee and other interested Members of how the powers are exercised and of whether and when they can be done away because we have moved to a new system of financial services regulation.

6.5 pm  

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I thank the Minister for all his work on these financial services SIs. I have debated some of them and the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) has debated some, but he has had to debate almost all of them. That is a terrible burden for one man to have to bear, and it illustrates that this process is hugely time consuming. It is eating up massive amounts of all our time. We might hope that we will not need to use these statutory instruments, but as we head towards Brexit, and with the Prime Minister’s announcements over the past 24 hours, it feels as though things are getting more and more perilous the closer we get.

In many cases it feels very much like we are rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic, because we are less than five weeks from exit day and the Government are quite clearly running down the clock. We should be under no illusions that while a no deal is an absolute catastrophe, the deal being proposed is not good enough either. There are no merits to a no-deal Brexit plan for financial services, but whatever deal can be cobbled together, it will be nowhere near as good for financial services as what we have at the moment. Removing passporting, which is part of what this legislation is all about, will have a huge impact on financial services and how they operate.

It is no secret that I have very different opinions from many on the UK Government Benches, but this is no longer a question of differing opinions. The reality is that no competent Government would have let things
get to this stage. We should not be coming here at the very last minute to discuss such legislation. The Minister was up front in saying that there were errors in the legislation, but that smacks of a process that is not good enough. Some things have been picked up as incorrect, but there may be other things, because this is a substantial SI. We have got it pretty late in the day, and it is incredibly detailed and complex.

I would like the Prime Minister to recognise the urgency of the situation and extend article 50, taking no deal off the table, to give us more time on all this. Ideally, I would like us to stay in the single market and the customs union, because that would make things hugely simpler, certainly for financial services and for everybody else in other sectors of the economy too.

The Scottish Government have been doing their best, preparing as best they can, but they cannot mitigate everything. We do not yet have the Treasury’s full analysis of the Prime Minister’s Brexit deal, despite this House having voted on it twice. Last week the Scottish Government invested in their own analysis, which was published last week in a report by our chief economist. The results were damning. It said that Scotland could see a fall in GDP by 7% in the first two years after Brexit. That would be an enormous blow to our industries and jobs and to the household incomes of the people of Scotland. To put things in context, the 2008 recession saw Scotland’s GDP fall by 5.7%. This shambolic UK Government, in hook to the most extreme elements on their Benches, are doing this on purpose.

The analysis looked at only the first two years after Brexit, but the long-term effects could be sustained and long lasting. The Fraser of Allander Institute in my constituency has conducted one of the most comprehensive studies to date of the effects of migration on the UK economy. Migration is a huge issue for the financial services sector, which has much talent from around the world that needs to be able to move backwards and forwards without any difficulties. The effect of reduced migration after Brexit will lower Scotland’s GDP by 9% over the next 20 years. Reduced migration is very much the intention of the Prime Minister’s deal—it proposes to slash immigration by 80%. That will have a massive impact. [Interruption.] Government Members may sigh, but this will have a huge impact on our financial services—on the skills and talents of people coming to live and work in Scotland. The London bubble may well be fine, but as we get further away from that bubble, the impact will be greater—on Edinburgh, on Aberdeen and on Glasgow. It will mean fewer of the working-age population contributing to the economy and enriching our lives. It is an unforgivable, ideological obsession, which has no evidence to support it.

The impact of no deal is very serious indeed, and many businesses in my constituency are gravely concerned about their futures. This SI, as the Minister says, is intended to offer consistency for businesses in the event of a no-deal cliff edge. However, relying on transitional provisions such as the temporary permissions regimes offers very little in the way of reassurance for businesses. We are being encouraged to rush through significant pieces of legislation, right, left and centre, without proper scrutiny for those businesses to engage with, and the effects will be felt by nearly 60,000 businesses. It is just not possible for each of those businesses—small and large businesses and businesses of varying different types and of varying different sectors—to have their say on this to explain exactly how it will affect them. The effects will impact them, yet they will not have the opportunity to fully engage in the process.

The hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) said that the temporary permissions regimes allows companies to provide services in the UK for up to three years after 29 March. I agree very much with what she and the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) said about the consistency of this process. We are seeing so many different pieces of legislation and so many different SIs, and that is causing inconsistency, which is a worry. Some firms may find that, for one part of their business there is one date, but for another part there is another date. That will cause additional confusion.

Furthermore, businesses may well infer from these stopgap measures that the Government are expecting chaos after Brexit, and that is a position I would find it difficult to disagree with. It is no wonder that, in this context, we are seeing investment in UK businesses grinding to a halt. Ernst & Young noted that £800 billion of assets have been moved from the UK to Europe since 2016, which is absolutely terrifying.

This SI also deals with mortgages. It talks about covering contracts after Brexit, but only if they are secured on residential property in the UK. There are different measures for properties outside the UK, which means yet more complication for people to deal with. The instrument also deals with investment firms and insurance. The impact assessment says that branches of EEA banks authorised in the UK will be treated in the same way as third country branches are treated now. That is yet more red tape and more paperwork. The SI deals with consumer credit, which is, of course, hugely important to all of our constituents in their daily lives. Those are just some of the highlights of this very complex SI, and they illustrate just how much more difficult things will be than they are at the moment.

The hon. Member for Oxford East mentioned scrutiny. Part 8 of the SI covers the setting of fees by the Bank of England, the Financial Conduct Authority and the Prudential Regulation Authority. In effect, we are saying to those organisations, “Right, you go ahead and set your fees.” We will lose any idea of scrutiny over this. I am sure that those organisations will set reasonable fees, but can we be certain about that? We are giving that power to them. We are taking that power away from ourselves. There are no Brexiteers here saying, “Oh, we talked about taking back control.” Actually, we are not taking back control; we are losing any sense of control over this because we are delegating it all to those organisations. They may well have to report back, but we are still losing direct control.

The issue of familiarisation costs has been mentioned. A total of £1,900 per firm does not sound huge, but, as was mentioned earlier, it is affecting 59,200 firms, which is hugely significant. We should consider the fact that this is costing industry £110 million. This is money that appears to be leading us towards, they will be spending this huge amount of money when they could have been investing it in other things, such as staff and research and development. This money is just being sucked up by Brexit, and we will be left all the poorer.
[Alison Thewliss]

Let me return now to this idea of transitional provisions. As the provisions are transitional, it means that, at some point, we will have to come back to them. All of these SIs and pieces of legislation that we have been working on and divvying up will have to be revisited. That does not fill me with any great joy; I am sure that it does not fill the Minister with any great joy. As other Members have said, we need to see the UK Government’s wider plans. Where is the White Paper on financial services that will cover all of these things comprehensively, that will set out our direction of travel, and that will set out the principles of our financial services? It is hugely important to have these principles in place. In 2008, at the time of the crash, financial services lost their way. As part of the EU, we put these principles in place to get us back on track. We cannot see any dilution of those principles as we go forward, because we will end up in exactly the same disastrous place. I question the process and the legislation, but I remind the House that it is in the Prime Minister’s gift to withdraw the option of a no-deal Brexit. If she did that, it would render everything that we are talking about today completely useless, but we would be in a better place.

On the substantive content, I have a point to which I would like to draw the House’s attention. In a letter to the Treasury, the Financial Markets Law Committee highlighted an area of legal uncertainty arising from the textual content of the SI. Section 137R(4) of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 grants the FCA the power to make rules applying to authorised persons in relation to communications by or approved by them if it considers that such rules are required to ensure compliance with certain “listed requirements”. The legislation goes on to explain that “listed requirements” means requirements under the law of the UK that appear to the FCA to correspond to the requirements of various EU legislation.

This definition leaves considerable scope for interpretation. I have raised in this House and in Committee my concerns about the nature of the withdrawal Act and the erosion of parliamentary scrutiny that it brings. It does appear that we are handing an awful lot of latitude to a public body in this example cited by the FMLC. It recommends that a more specific list, such as that included in the original drafting, would be more useful, albeit altered to reflect UK legislation. If we are to be in this position facing a no-deal Brexit, despite all evidence showing the damage that that will cause, we need to have more robust and more detailed plans in place.

Fundamentally, everybody in this House knows the position of the Scottish National party. In Scotland, we voted to remain in the EU. We have worked very hard on building up our financial services sector in Scotland. It is an important, high-skill and high-pay sector, which drives many of our towns and cities. To face the prospect of crashing out without a deal is an absolutely appalling situation. Everybody working in this sector deserves better than the plans that the Prime Minister has put forward and they certainly deserve better than a no deal, and she should take that off the table.

6.18 pm

John Glen: It is a pleasure to respond to the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). By the end of this process, we will have discussed 53 SIs for the financial services in 30 discrete debates. In each one of them, there are some common themes to the remarks. I appreciate that this is not a desirable process to go through, but it is a unique process. It is a process that we have responsibility for at this time, but I hope that we will not need to use or to rely on its outcomes. None the less, this SI is needed to ensure that we do have a robust and functioning legislative framework for financial services regulation after exit. I am determined that I will, to the best of my ability as a junior Treasury Minister, deliver this programme of SIs.

Hon. Members have raised a number of specific points, which I will now address. The hon. Member for Oxford East asked why we have chosen to transfer powers to the FCA. This is consistent with our overall approach to onshoring. Only existing EU functions are being transferred to UK regulators, apart from the temporary transitional tool. I have written to the hon. Lady with a full explanation of the consolidated text, and I will send that explanation to her shortly in addition to the other replies that I have given to her.

In response to the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough, in practice there is a logistical challenge in putting everything together, conducting multiple streams of consultations simultaneously and delivering in each discrete area what is required as a fix for the undesirable outcome of no deal. Despite the enormous effort by my officials in the Treasury to get this right, it would have been very challenging to set out the architecture proactively from the outset. This FSMA SI makes many consequential amendments that were needed to follow on from previous SIs, which is why it was set out late. How the FCA will use these powers will be set out later this week, providing a lot more clarity on that matter.

The hon. Member for Oxford East asked about insurance business transfer. We consulted the insurance sector on these business transfer transitionalions, and it confirmed that this was the right approach and helped to develop the provisions. We have worked collaboratively with different industry sector representatives throughout.

The hon. Member for Glasgow Central raised a specific legal point—a dispute about the wording. I will have to look at the matter and write to her. In the round, we have used TheCityUK as a convening trade association to bring relevant bodies together, and it has been very thorough in its work. The regulators are already consulting the industry, and firms have responded positively. The regulators, including the Prudential Regulation Authority, will shortly be setting out the outcome of those consultations. I think that I have covered the point raised about the consolidated Bill.

I acknowledge that FSMA is an important part of the UK’s framework for financial services regulation, but amending FSMA using secondary legislation is standard and happens several times a year. I accept the remarks of the hon. Member for Glasgow Central concerning the unusual nature of this—it is necessarily so because of what we are trying to do to prepare for a no-deal situation—but EU directives have been implemented using secondary legislation since the UK joined the EU. For financial services, that has often involved amending FSMA. Parliament approved the secondary legislation powers in FSMA itself to task the
Treasury with keeping the FSMA regime up to date, such as the power to amend the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Regulated Activities) Order 2001.

Let me turn to the points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough, who chairs the Treasury Committee. I welcome the opportunity to be scrutinised many times by her Select Committee. Regarding the methodology for calculating the familiarisation costs, there is a cross-governmental set of guidance from the Cabinet Office, but I will write to my right hon. Friend with specific details. Clearly, the cost per word varies but we have a method for describing that across Government, and we have used that method. We have drawn on the better regulation guidance and we have consulted on the impact assessment across Government.

My right hon. Friend asked whether the Government will provide regulators with powers to make the commencement of cliff-edge risks consistent. This is exactly what the temporary transitional power is for: the regulators will be able to phase in the vast majority of changes consistently. I said before the Select Committee that it would be important to lay any directions in the House of Commons Library and the House of Lords Library, and that I would ensure that the Treasury Committee was notified.

The hon. Member for Oxford East mentioned the point made by Lord Lexden. Lord Lexden used to work with me at the Conservative Research Department, and he was always very good at picking out errors. I shall look carefully at his remarks and see whether there is an appropriate response.

The hon. Member for Glasgow Central raised the issue of charging fees and the powers given to the regulator. The fee-setting powers and controls in this instrument reflect the existing powers that the regulators have in legislation. There is no meaningful change in the powers; the extension is consistent with the current role of the regulators. The hon. Lady also asked why the House has not been given enough time properly to scrutinise this legislation. I respectfully say that we have done as much as we can in the time available. We have engaged constructively with firms and we published these SIs well in advance of laying them before the House. It has been a significant iterative process. I do not describe it as a perfect process, but it has been quite thorough.

Overall, this SI will ensure that we have the necessary functions and powers in the Treasury and in our regulators in the event that the UK leaves the EU without a deal or an implementation period. This has been a tough process. I pay tribute to my opposite numbers on the Opposition Front Benches.

Joseph Johnson (Orpington) (Con): I recognise that my hon. Friend is doing valiant work, but does he acknowledge that this process of moving to a new regime is proving extremely unsettling for players in the financial services sector? A recent report by Ernst & Young estimates that £800 billion-worth of assets and people have moved to other jurisdictions since the referendum as a consequence of our decision to move to a precarious, patchy and one-sided regime of equivalence that is a very poor substitute for our current system of passporting. What assessment has he made of news from the Amsterdam regulator last week that it is boosting the resources of the Dutch Authority for the Financial Markets by 10% to cope with the additional work that it is receiving as a result of our painful decisions?

John Glen: The process that we have gone through with these no-deal SIs has been as thorough as possible in the circumstances. My hon. Friend is making a wider point about the desirability of being in this situation and the need actually to secure deal. During the implementation period, we will have maximum opportunity to determine the method for securing equivalence, which we envisage would be by June next year. I recognise that there is uncertainty, but despite some pretty grim suggestions over what would happen with jobs, the City of London is resilient. Although it has made contingency arrangements, as would be expected, we have not seen large numbers of jobs drain away from the City as some would have anticipated. We need to secure the deal and then work through the issues with regard to the implementation period.

I pay tribute to the work of the hon. Members for Oxford East and for Glasgow Central, and the scrutiny of the Select Committee, throughout this process. I know that we still have a number of SI debates to go, with two on Wednesday and several more next week, but I hope that I have explained the rationale for this particular SI and that the House will be able to support these regulations.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Amendment)(EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.
 Exiting the European Union (Consumer Protection)

6.28 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I beg to move,

That the draft REACH etc. (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 5 February, be approved.

Madam Deputy Speaker, have you ever considered what life was like before you became a Member of Parliament? Well, I never had a dream come true until I was elected to Parliament, but if I take myself back to when I was at high school, I have to admit that my love of chemistry started when I was very young. I was very much inspired by colours, and it was only through chemicals that we had colours—whether it was the colour blue or a range of colours that appealed to us all. This got me excited in chemistry. Moving on a little bit further, I eventually ended up doing a PhD in chemistry. Little did I know that 30 years later, I would be here putting regulations in place.

Why do chemicals matter? Chemicals matter because they are not only part of our second-biggest manufacturing industry but critical to so many of the elements that we have around us, whether in the oil in people’s watches, in paint, or in the different chemicals that are applied not only in pharmaceuticals but in a wide variety of things that we just take for granted. They are even a key part of fireworks, because without chemicals—the inorganic chemicals, in particular—we would not get the wide range of colours. I do not know if you were here, Madam Deputy Speaker, on the night when we had chemicals in fireworks being exploded above Big Ben—that special evening when we were going to reach for the stars, but fortunately did not bring the House down.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green) rose—

Dr Coffey: I will happily give way and then bring my speech back to the SI.

Caroline Lucas: I was rather hoping that the Minister might do that, because something incredibly important is at stake here. At a recent meeting of the Environmental Audit Committee, we had before us the Chemicals Industry Association, which said:

“No deal would essentially mean, if I can put it lightly, catastrophic effects on the chemical industry here in the UK.”

Does she agree with that assessment, and will she do her very best, then, to rule out no deal?

Dr Coffey: No. I do not agree with that assessment. Nevertheless, this SI is not about whether we have a deal or not—it is about having an effective regulatory system. It is not about changing policy or trying to make it stronger—it is about trying to make sure that we can have something that works and continues to work in future.

In line with the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, these regulations simply make technical and legal amendments, including transitional arrangements, to maintain the effectiveness and continuity of UK legislation that would otherwise be left significantly inoperable, so that the law as today will continue to function legally following our exit from the EU. I recognise that the statutory instrument is long and makes many adjustments, but I can assure the House that they represent no changes of policy.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): The truth is that the statutory instrument will not be able simply to cut and paste the REACH database into UK law. We cannot cut and paste the chemicals framework established by the EU into UK law because it regulates, evaluates and authorises chemicals, and that is significantly different. That is why the Minister is asking this House to establish a UK chemicals database and asking the UK industry to make significant contributions towards that. That is the case, is it not?

Dr Coffey: That is right. These regulations will apply to the whole of the United Kingdom, with the exception of paragraph 1 of schedule 11, which makes amendments to existing domestic legislation regarding the disposal of polychlorinated biphenyls that, in the current regulations I referred to, extends only to England and Wales. This Government, and this country, have to be ready for the prospect of not being part of ECHA—the European Chemicals Agency—in future, and we therefore need to put in place the regulatory framework that means we will continue to have a safe chemicals industry in future.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): The Minister will be aware, I am sure, of the concern that has been expressed by Rolls-Royce, and others, that the SI does not take account of all the scenarios. It mentions, in particular, an application for EU authorisation submitted by a European economic area entity for which a decision has not yet been made and on which a UK downstream user is dependent. Its concern is that post 29 March, in the event of a no-deal exit, UK companies could be left without a proper authorisation, putting many of them in an incredibly difficult position.

Dr Coffey: Actually, I am not aware of the reference to that by Rolls-Royce. Yes, we do need, in effect, to replicate the database, and that is what part of these regulations establishes. However, I want to make it clear to the House thatCEFIC—the European Chemical Industry Council—and the Chemical Industries Association in the UK have made a joint statement to their members that the contracts that currently exist between consortiums should be amended so that information or data is available both for REACH and for UK REACH in future. None of the consortiums can force their members to do that, but I believe that it is in their best interests to make sure that the data and information required is available to both chemicals regulation systems.

As I said, the regulations apply to the whole of the United Kingdom. This Government and the devolved Administrations have worked together closely on these regulations and have agreed that a UK-wide REACH system will mean a coherent UK market backed by consistent policies and chemical management. The devolved Administrations have been involved in the drafting of the SI and have given their consent. That includes the Labour-run Welsh Government and the SNP-run Scottish Government. Indeed, this was also scrutinised by the Scottish Parliament, which also gave its consent.

Mary Creagh: A little earlier, the Minister talked about a section—forgive me, but I do not have the exact number—relating to the disposal of PCBs. Is she saying...
that different regulations will apply in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and, if so, will they be to higher or lower standards, or the same?

**Dr Coffey:** I am saying that, as it stands today, chemicals regulation is a devolved matter in how Governments can apply these things. We have a particular regulation that currently applies only to England and Wales. The Scottish and other Administrations will have made their own applications in legislation for that. That is why this is the only bit of the entire statutory instrument that does not apply to the whole of the United Kingdom.

**John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con):** Will the Minister confirm that there will be absolutely no reduction in safety standards—because we all want high safety standards—and does she recall that when REACH first came in, quite a lot of industry voices said that it was more bureaucratic and more expensive but no safer?

**Dr Coffey:** The costs are still going to be significant for administering our own chemicals system in future, but I can assure my right hon. Friend that the safety standards will be consistent and, indeed, we will continue to learn from ECHA in future. As he will be aware, in the future economic relationship that has been put forward through the political declaration, and in ongoing statements by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, we would seek to become an associate member of ECHA in future to share these things in order to try to reduce or mitigate some of the challenges that people like Rolls-Royce are anticipating. But that is not yet an agreed matter, and it is important that the Government set before the House appropriate regulations to make sure that we have that continued safety of chemicals.

Before I explain the provisions further set out in the SI, I want to emphasise that we are absolutely keeping the fundamental approach of REACH, with its aims of ensuring a high level of protection of human health and the environment, as well as enhancing innovation and competitiveness. The building blocks of REACH will all remain: industry’s primary duty to understand the hazards and risks of chemicals and to ensure safe use, all tied to the principle of no data, no market; registration by industry of the chemicals it produces and places on the market; dossier evaluation by the regulator of at least 5% of registration dossiers to check compliance and quality, exactly as ECHA is expected to do today; and substance evaluation, which is investigation by the regulator of outstanding concerns about a chemical often leading to a requirement on industry to fill the knowledge gaps. The UK has been responsible, through ECHA, for making sure that there have been 24 evaluations—for example, of the chemical climbazole, which is used in anti-dandruff shampoos but is suspected of causing feminisation in fish. Then there is the authorisation process that forces industry to apply for and justify continued use of substances of very high concern. Finally, there is restriction of the most dangerous chemicals where unacceptable risks remain.

On the definition of duty holders, article 3 of schedule 1 of the statutory instrument changes the definitions of the various industry duty holders so that they refer to the United Kingdom rather than the European Union. Obviously, this is a simple change, but essential. Without it, UK industry would have no duty to ensure the safe use of the chemicals it produces and uses.

**UK REACH** will continue with an independent regulatory agency to carry out a central role with a range of technical, scientific and administrative functions—the role that is currently carried out by ECHA. The statutory instrument allocates this role to the Health and Safety Executive under article 2A of schedule 1. The HSE will receive industry’s registrations of chemicals. It will make many technical decisions itself—for example, in dossier and substance evaluations, as well as in scrutinising authorisation applications and making scientific recommendations on restrictions. This builds on the HSE’s existing activities as the UK competent authority for REACH. At the same time, the Environment Agency and the devolved environmental regulators will have the role of providing the advice that the HSE will need on environmental matters, as set out in article 2B of schedule 1.

The HSE, as the UK agency, must also draw on independent expert scientific advice when developing its opinions on restrictions and authorisations. This will add to the robust evidence and analysis underpinning its opinions. We expect the HSE to obtain external advice, but there may sometimes be reasons why it does not feel it needs to do so, such as where ECHA has already published a robust opinion on a chemical. In such cases, where the HSE decides not to take further scientific advice, it must publish its justification, as set out in article 77. Finally, appeals against the HSE’s decisions will be heard by an independent body, the first-tier tribunal, as set out in article 91.

**Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con):** The Minister will be aware that I have some concern about the REACH regulations after we leave the European Union, but I am aware that we are talking about the statutory instrument and how it affects the United Kingdom leaving the European Union. She said in response to one of my written parliamentary questions that she wishes to have associate membership of REACH. Although I am not convinced that can actually happen, can she provide me with some kind of reassurance that the Environment Agency currently has the capability to ensure that compliance will continue after we leave the European Union?

**Dr Coffey:** I am conscious of my hon. Friend’s desire to have an ongoing relationship with ECHA. As I have already set out, that is the Government’s desire, too. The Environment Agency is recruiting an extra 10 staff, and the HSE will be taking on an extra 35 to 40 people to help fulfil the functions it already undertakes today. My understanding is that we have estimated the future cost of running UK REACH to be about £13 million a year. By way of comparison, ECHA itself costs about £80 million a year to look after 28 member states. That is why we believe that we are putting in the necessary resource to make sure that the HSE, the EA and, indeed, other regulators are able to play their part.

**Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab):** I am not terribly sure that the Minister has reassured the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord). I want to know how we will ensure that the British regime will actually parallel the regulations and approvals of Europe so that we can have the trading arrangements that are critical to areas like mine on Teesside.
Dr Coffey: As I said, we are recruiting staff to undertake additional elements, but it will be open to the regulator to take advice from where it likes, whether that is from ECHA, from within the UK—we should remember that, in many cases, UK scientists are the people giving advice to ECHA—or, indeed, from further afield. We will not be restricting the regulator’s consideration, but it matters that we have an operational scenario for chemicals regulation. The House can be assured that we will continue to have a safe chemicals industry in the future.

Mary Creagh: The Minister will be aware that my Committee, the Environmental Audit Committee, held an evidence session in December 2018, subsequent to our report published in 2017, in which we heard from Elizabeth Shepherd, a partner at Eversheds Sutherland. She is one of the UK’s leading experts in chemical regulation, and she said: “The UK regulator, HSE, is no longer involved in the evaluation of substances. HSE has, to date, played a very active part in evaluating chemicals… the chemicals that were assigned to HSE for the 2018-19 period have been moved away from the UK already to other evaluating authorities. Businesses are concerned that they will lose the insight that participation gave them and the opportunity to influence the shape of regulation.” We are losing our influence, are we not?

Dr Coffey: I do not think we are losing our influence. The measure was taken by ECHA after the people of the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. Currently, a country cannot be a member of ECHA by being a member state of the European Union, so this is forward planning. Some of these assessments can take time to go through the ECHA process, and therefore, given that the HSE would not be a relevant authority for future ECHA authorisations, I would not want to criticise ECHA for having made that decision. Meanwhile, the HSE has the competence, and it has started recruiting people to undertake the different activities it will need to do.

I will now move on to decision making and working with the devolved Administrations. Just as the HSE inherits the role and functions of ECHA, the responsibilities of the European Commission will pass to the Secretary of State. For example, the Secretary of State will make decisions to authorise the use of a substance of very high concern or to restrict chemicals on the basis of an opinion from the HSE, as covered by articles 60 and 73.

REACH also covers devolved matters such as environmental protection. For that reason, the Secretary of State must act with the consent of the devolved Administrations where a decision relates to an area of devolved competence, as set out in proposed new article 4A in schedule 1. A safeguard clause allows the devolved Administrations, and indeed the Secretary of State, to take urgent action where it is needed to protect human health or the environment. This must then be followed up with the normal restriction process to see whether there should be a UK-wide control, as set out in article 129.

On transferring existing UK registrants into the UK REACH system, the regulations contain a range of transitional provisions to provide a legal continuity to business and to protect supply chains. All registrations held by UK companies will be automatically transferred, often known as “grandfathered,” to the UK REACH system at the point of exit, as set out by proposed new article 127A in schedule 2, which means there will be no break in their access to the UK market.

Companies will need to provide the HSE with information to support their registrations in two phases: initial information within 120 days and the full information within two years. That is set out in proposed new article 127B in schedule 2.

Caroline Lucas: I have been reading worrying material. It is concerning that a civil servant recently confirmed that the IT system on which all of this will be based will not be fully functioning by exit day. Can the Minister confirm that it will? How do we know that the HSE has enough staff? There have recently been big cutbacks in HSE staffing. Are more staff being recruited for the HSE?

Dr Coffey: The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs effectively contracts with the HSE to provide the necessary staff. The HSE covers a wide range of activities right across Government, particularly on safety at work.

The IT system is still being tested. I will be candid with the House that we will make a call this week on whether the system is ready to go live, or whether we will have to do our contingency plan of companies providing that information to us. I do not have an answer ready, because the assessment has not yet been made. In essence, the Government will still have the information they require to run a safe chemicals system. As I say, the decision will be made at the end of this week on whether companies or the Government will upload the information.

Caroline Lucas: Will the Minister give way?

Dr Coffey: No, I do not need to give way on that point.

One way or another, the Government will have the information they need to ensure that we have a safe system.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) set out, REACH places a registration duty on importers of chemicals. This will be new for companies that import from the EU or the European economic area, as they are currently covered by their supplier’s registration. That is why we are giving them a two-year grace period, which will give them time to adapt and will protect supply chains. In the meantime, they must send information to the agency within 180 days to provide assurance that they know how to manage the chemicals safely—that is set out in proposed new article 127E in schedule 2. We will keep both two-year deadlines, for grandfathering and for downstream user registrations, under review.

Dr Offord rose—

Mary Creagh rose—

Dr Coffey: I would like to bring this to a close fairly soon, because I am conscious that some Members have put in to speak, as would normally be the case rather than the Minister taking interventions.

Dr Offord: I am grateful to the Minister for taking interventions, which we are seeking to make because we have specific questions on which she can provide us
with advice. Is it the Government’s intention, post-Brexit, to update regulations in compliance with REACH to ensure that the two systems work side by side?

Dr Coffey: In effect it will be for the HSE, as the regulator, to make decisions on each level of the process. I have no reason to doubt that the HSE and ECHA will have similar principles in how they go about this. We are not seeking a change in any policy to move away from the REACH process.

It is fair to say that the UK has been trying to get some chemicals restricted much more quickly than ECHA and other EU member states have sought, so there may be opportunities to move more quickly on some of these matters. Again, it will be a judgment call for the HSE on whether to make that recommendation to the Secretary of State.

As for stakeholders, we held a series of informal briefings last summer at which we outlined the proposed regulatory approach, and representatives from the chemicals sector and beyond and other stakeholders, including non-governmental organisations and scientific societies, came to those briefings. Since then, we published a technical notice in September and additional guidance in December and continued with more stakeholder engagement to explain in detail what UK REACH is and what it means for industry. The House will also be aware that I invited MPs, particularly those with chemicals companies in their constituency, to attend briefings.

I recognise the concerns about why businesses have to submit data to the HSE when they have previously registered with ECHA and the potential costs involved. Such concerns were also expressed in the report by the Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee in the other place. As the Government said in the White Paper, we want a strong deal under which the UK will continue to participate fully in EU REACH and the work of the ECHA. The impact assessment considered the question of data in detail, and the Regulatory Policy Committee stated that the assessment used a proportionate level of evidence to support estimates of the impacts, including impacts on business. We should not expect a repeat of the costs of complying with EU REACH. For example, businesses that have already invested in putting together the EU registration dossier will not face administration costs again.

To be clear about the importance of information. The “no data, no market” principle is fundamental to REACH, and we will not weaken that in any way. It underpins effective chemicals management by both industry and the regulator. We cannot rely on the fact that such data has already been sent to ECHA. It is simply not correct to say that a chemical is deemed to be safe once it has been registered under EU REACH. Registration is how a company shows its understanding of the hazards and how to control the risks, but it does not mean that ECHA and other regulators have approved that chemical or endorsed it as safe.

ECHA will not evaluate the UK dossiers that it received for the June 2018 deadline. ECHA has also stated that, in the majority of dossiers it opens for evaluation, it needs to follow up with requests for important safety information on chemicals, meaning that the company’s safety measures may also not be adequate. Only the UK agency will be able to provide the assurance that chemicals are safely managed in the UK. To give a sense of scale, we will be grandfathering over 12,000 registrations into UK REACH—35% of them from 2018—representing 5,700 chemicals. Looking forward, we would then expect 50 to 100 new chemicals to be registered each year. We have much less understanding of how many notifications there will be for chemicals imported from the EU, because there is currently no duty to report that information in most cases. That emphasises the importance of the notification process so that we know what chemicals are being used in the UK.

REACH is one of the largest and most complex pieces of EU legislation and Members and others have rightly wondered how we would transfer it into UK law. I am confident that the provisions in these regulations mean that we will continue to ensure the highest levels of protection for human health and the environment, based on robust evidence and strong scientific analysis.

John Redwood: Maybe I can help the Minister. Is it not the case that the Intrastat declarations provide the necessary information about the current trade in European chemicals?

Dr Coffey: I do not know the answer to that, but I will share the suggestion with my officials, some of whom are conveniently in the Box.

I want to assure right hon, and hon. Members that we are taking steps to provide the industry with the legal certainty it needs to operate and to preserve the supply chains for the chemicals on which we all depend.

6.53 pm

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): Labour believes that this statutory instrument needs urgent modification to avoid disruption to UK businesses in the event of a no-deal Brexit. It shows insufficient understanding of how chemicals are actually managed in complex supply chains, and is therefore unworkable and will unnecessarily create supply disruption issues for UK businesses. Labour believes that continued participation in REACH is the surest way to avoid extra costs and burdens for business, to save jobs and to protect animal welfare, health and safety, and the environment.

The value of the UK chemicals industry cannot be overstated. The sector directly employs 88,000 people, and the industry is worth £6.4 billion to the UK economy every year. It is vital in the supply chain to many other sectors including automotive, pharmaceuticals and aerospace, as well as the production of everyday items such as cleaning products, clothes, and electronics. It is therefore extremely disappointing that we have only been given half a sitting day’s notice of this SI. It represents the second iteration that the Government have published, yet it does little to address the concerns with the first version. The Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee said of this re-laid SI that it remains “concerned that the Department has provided insufficient information on the possible impact of the proposed changes”.

Given the concerns expressed by the Committee, industry, environmental and animal welfare groups and the Opposition, does the Minister agree that the prudent thing would be to take this SI back to the drawing board?

I am particularly worried because I am told that the Health and Safety Executive lacks the capacity, resource, experience and expertise in such a complex field to
carry out the functions that the Government propose to transfer from the European Chemicals Agency. As with so many public sector organisations, the HSE has suffered brutal cutbacks. Between 2010 and 2017, its budget was cut by 40%, so why does the SI contain confirmation of its funding? Will the Minister confirm today that funding and resources will be available to the HSE and the Environment Agency for them to perform the proposed duties outlined?

The SI also removes layers of supporting committees at EU level that help to ensure that decisions are based on the best scientific advice and that there is proper scrutiny and oversight. Those committees allow stakeholders from industry, non-governmental organisations and trade unions to collaborate in informing decisions and to ensure balance. In the SI, that is replaced with a duty for the HSE to seek external advice, but no formal committees of experts and stakeholders are being proposed to review and scrutinise the scientific knowledge relating to chemicals.

Furthermore, the SI establishes that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will make final decisions relating to the status of particular chemicals, whereas the European Commission makes them at EU level. Although we hope it is unlikely that a Secretary of State will diverge from HSE recommendations, they are not explicitly prevented from so doing. We know that the current Secretary of State is notoriously no fan of experts, but he may have gone too far in asking us to grant him powers to override recommendations from the HSE.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) said, the Government initially said that they could cut and paste data from the REACH database. However, there seems to have been a significant rowing back from that, with current guidance indicating that companies will provide all the data. As the Minister will no doubt be aware, in order to have copied data from the REACH database, the UK would have needed a licence from the European Chemicals Agency. Will the Minister confirm what progress she and Government colleagues have made in acquiring permission to access the REACH database after 29 March?

Many UK-based companies do not own or have sufficient rights to use the data needed for registration, for a variety of complex reasons, including the fact that many REACH registration dossiers have been developed and submitted by consortia of companies under a joint submission agreement with specific and restricted access rights. A survey of 38 companies by the Chemical Industries Association found that 75% of them do not own the data that would be required for them to register chemicals under UK REACH. Does the Minister recognise that meeting the two-year registration deadline is an almost impossible and extremely costly task for many companies? The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) asked about the current status of the IT provisions, and I was unconvinced by the Minister’s response that they will be ready and fit for purpose on exit day.

After Brexit, companies registered with REACH will no longer be able to sell into the EEA market without transferring their registrations to an EEA-based organisation. How many companies have taken such action to date, and what support has the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs provided to them? Given the likelihood that companies will have to duplicate tests already conducted if the Secretary of State cannot agree access to information in the REACH database, there is a real risk that animal tests would have to be re conducted. In evidence to the Lords EU Energy and Environment Sub-Committee, the Minister refused to rule out the idea that a UK REACH system would not lead to more animal testing.

John Redwood: Surely global companies are used to selling into a variety of jurisdictions with different regulatory requirements, and each company has a body of intellectual property that it owns and sends to the appropriate regulator. I do not see any need to duplicate the work if that is already there. If a company wants to sell into the UK, it will share that with the UK authority.

Sue Hayman: I am afraid that that is not the information I have been given. As I said, the Minister did not rule out that out to the Lords Committee, and when I went to Brussels to visit the REACH team, they confirmed that they believed this would be the case. Will the Minister categorically confirm whether these proposals have the potential to lead to further animal testing?

Mary Creagh: My hon. Friend has triggered a memory that I thought I had buried. On the animal testing point, when our Committee held an update hearing in December, one concern raised was about where the intellectual property that UK companies have submitted into the REACH database lives. There was a great deal of concern that the Minister’s reassurances that companies could just go and get that intellectual property, which they have paid for and registered, out of the database is problematic, because it is now owned by REACH, and once the UK leaves, we ironically will not have access to our own intellectual property. Does that not show the complete misunderstanding of the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) of how the world trades in chemicals, on which REACH sets the global standard?

Sue Hayman: I thank my hon. Friend for making that important point, and I will be interested to hear the Minister’s response.

If we voted to pass this SI, we would be voting for legislation that is likely to increase animal suffering through duplicate testing. It would also mean that critical decisions on chemicals were made by a body with little experience and layers of accountability and scientific expertise stripped away. Greener UK has said:

“As currently drafted, the chemicals SI significantly weakens the regulation of chemicals, including those with links to cancer and hormone disruption.”

How can we responsibly let this secondary legislation pass, in the light of these serious and grave reservations? Does the Minister recognise those risks, and can she guarantee that British people will continue to receive the same health and safety and environmental benefits that we currently do as a member of REACH?

In a no-deal Brexit scenario, we would become a third party to REACH on 29 March, with all existing REACH registrations and authorisations held by UK companies becoming immediately invalid. Companies
UK and EU. Many billions of pounds' worth of trade between the two. That could lead to serious ramifications if trade is lost. Companies would potentially need customers to make importer registrations. That could lead to serious ramifications if they have deep concerns about this. When they have given them a way in the European Union? Those rights into the UK's chemical regulation system. Five weeks—they will have to transfer their registrations to the EU. What will happen in the next 48 hours, let alone the next week? The exit day, whenever that may come—goodness knows where, if they want to keep trading with the EU after Brexit. The issue of grandfathering rights. Is not the truth that we have last-minute scrambling to deal with matters of such profound importance as those covered by this statutory instrument.

Sue Hayman: I completely agree. In fact, representatives of trade unions have made exactly that point to me, and they have deep concerns about this. Companies wanting to transfer their registrations would potentially need customers to make importer registrations. That could lead to serious ramifications down the supply chain and interruptions to the many billions of pounds' worth of trade between the UK and EU.

Mary Creagh: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way; she is making an excellent speech and being very generous with her time. I wanted to intervene on the Minister on the issue of grandfathering rights. Is not the truth that British companies are now in an invidious position where, if they want to keep trading with the EU after exit day, whenever that may come—goodness knows what will happen in the next 48 hours, let alone the next five weeks—they will have to transfer their registrations to an affiliate in the EU? How can they then grandfather those rights into the UK's chemical regulation system when they have given them away in the European Union?

Sue Hayman: Once again, my hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. Of course, we also need to look at the huge costs to companies of these actions. The problems and difficulties that will be caused are not short-term but long-term.

Does the Minister acknowledge that a no-deal outcome brings with it huge risks to industry, jobs and our environment? Due to the numerous deficits and risks posed, we will be voting against this SI and would encourage Members across the House to do the same in good conscience.

7.5 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): This statutory instrument seeks to ensure a high level of protection for human health and the environment, including the promotion of alternative methods for assessing the hazards of substances, as well as the free circulation of substances, while enhancing competitiveness and innovation. Of course, it is necessary that the European Union regulation concerning the registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals, which took more than 14 years to develop, continues to work effectively in the UK. This statutory instrument will give the UK an independent capability to control the manufacture and import of chemicals into the UK and to understand the hazards and manage the risks connected to their manufacture and use.

However, as we have heard today, this is not a straightforward undertaking. Under the UK proposals, all transferring UK registrants need to submit registration data to the UK agency for a two-stage process potentially lasting up to two years. The Minister saying, 30-odd days from the Brexit date with no deal looming large. This staff are being recruited and training will be needed to see if IT systems can go live is not particularly reassuring, given the complexity of this undertaking.

All of this underlines that the regulation and supply of chemicals is yet another of the long list of areas of huge complexity in the Brexit process, and we can see that, prior to Brexit, those writing things on the sides of buses gave no thought to such complexities. As the Minister has pointed out, chemicals are woven into the very fabric of our daily lives. These last-minute statutory instruments are a desperate attempt to cover up the lack of forethought given to the complexities of Brexit. If the Prime Minister could assure us that she would simply not countenance a no-deal situation due to the damage it would cause across the UK, we would not have last-minute scrambling to deal with matters of such profound importance as those covered by this statutory instrument.

A report released on 7 February by the House of Lords Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee raised significant concerns about the draft regulations. It found insufficient information on the expected impact, with no financial analysis of the potential costs to the chemicals industry, particularly in relation to the cost of obtaining data needed to register a chemical with UK REACH and the prospect of initial compliance possibly doubling. The Committee also raised concerns about the ability of UK companies to maintain access to the EU market unless they move their registrations to an EU member state.

It recently emerged that the threat of a no-deal Brexit has already prompted more than 50 chemicals companies to move regulatory approvals from the UK to the EU. The companies, which have operations in the UK, have applied to use EU regulators for critical authorisations to protect their ability to do business legally. Their current authorisations would become worthless if there were no transition arrangement following 29 March—the current Brexit date—according to data provided to The Guardian by the European Commission. That matters because this industry is worth billions of pounds.

Chemicals registration is one of the main areas in which the National Audit Office has found that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is wholly unprepared, and there is a risk of disruption to the UK's chemical manufacturing industry that DEFRA simply cannot address on its own. A negotiated settlement would permit UK chemical manufacturers to export their products to the EU, but without a deal that will not be possible as the registration of products with the EU will cease to be recognised by the EU. In a no-deal scenario, UK chemical manufacturers would no longer be able to export their products to other member states. Recovering market access would be a lengthy process, and it cannot even be started until the UK leaves the EU.

Yet again, we are seeing more complex Brexit aspects for industry that this Government are seeking to scramble to deal with at the last moment. It honestly looks to me as though the Government are acting like an errant pupil who, having forgotten to do their homework, is trying to complete it on the bus on the way to school. This is not good enough. We need a proper extension of
article 50 to give this House the proper time to deal with the chaos into which we have been plunged by those who have taken us to the abyss with Brexit, ignoring electoral law to buy the referendum result they wanted and now, having fled the scene, leaving others to deal with the horror left behind. That is why we need, at the very least, an extension of article 50, instead of this House being threatened with a terrible deal or no deal at all.

The matter before us is important and extremely complex, and it should not be dealt with in a short debate on a statutory instrument like some kind of footnote. Yet sadly, this has become the new normal, as a collective madness seems to have gripped too many Members of this House. While I understand that what the Government are doing today is necessary, this is a most unsatisfactory process.

7.11 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson). I was getting my speech together as I was listening to what she said.

This is of course a very important sector for the UK economy. As the Minister said, REACH regulates not just chemicals but products—everything from the coating on a frying pan to the flame retardants in carpets and sofas, which my Environmental Audit Committee will be looking at very soon—and it is vital in the protection of human health. However, it is also a single market mechanism to ensure the free movement of chemicals across the EU and to enhance innovation in the EU chemicals market.

What British companies are asking themselves, as they look at this statutory instrument, is: what is to stop my EU customers going somewhere else? The answer in this statutory instrument is nothing. We are putting more costs on UK businesses, we are rendering them uncompetitive in the EU market and we are allowing the burden of excess regulation to fall on them both in this country and in their export markets.

What are companies doing in response to that? Many of them have already left. There has been an exodus of small chemical companies. Someone told me that a small mosquito repellent company—obviously, mosquito repellent is a very seasonal product—was concerned about what would happen to its business in the UK, making products predominantly for the EU market. It has shut down its factory, which I think was based in Gloucestershire, and has moved it to Italy. Quietly, it has moved tens of jobs and a manufacturing company out of this country.

REACH regulates about 30,000 substances bought and sold in the EU’s markets, and 60% of the UK chemicals industry’s exports go to the EU. This is our second largest export to the EU after cars. We have seen in the car industry—with Honda’s announcement last week, as with Jaguar Land Rover and Nissan—just how important access to the EU single market is for our automotive industry, as it is for the parts that go into those cars. Of course, chemicals—chromium in particular—are absolutely vital to the automotive and aerospace industry.

We export almost £15 billion-worth of chemicals a year to the EU, and all our businesses have to comply with REACH. So far, companies have made more than 12,000 registrations. The Environmental Audit Committee looked at this back in April 2017, and we have seen this problem coming at us down the track for the past two and a half years. We heard that UK businesses had at that point spent about £250 million on registration. Since then, there has been another registration deadline, in May 2018, for smaller volumes of substances. The estimate now is that about £600 million of UK companies’ money has been spent registering chemicals with the European Chemicals Agency up to last May.

What happens to those sunk costs? What is happening is that those companies now only have their own representative in the EU up to 1 April. As I mentioned to the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Sue Hayman), they will not have registrations if they have handed them over. They are in the very difficult position of not knowing what to do in the next four to six weeks, and I do not think these difficulties can be overstated.

The Minister has said that she is going to spend £13 million on the new HSE database, but the fact is that REACH costs £100 million a year to run. We are therefore going to have a tiny shadow of the European chemicals database here in the UK.

REACH is difficult to transpose into UK law because it is a governance structure, not just a list of substances. Even if it was just a list of substances, our registrations and the intellectual property that goes with them have, in some cases, been lost by UK companies, or transferred to different places and are difficult to track down. So many of the regulations apply to data sharing, co-operation and the facilitation of free trade in chemicals between companies in member states. If we are not in the single market and not in the EEA, we will not have access to that data.

The Minister has said that she wants associate membership of the European Chemicals Agency, but she did not say in her opening remarks whether that is still being pursued, and if so, how progress on that associate membership is going. I understand that Norway is a member of it through its membership of the EEA.

We are clearly duplicating regulation if we have our own version of REACH, and companies trading in the EU and the UK will incur duplicate costs. We are doubling the costs of chemical regulations by leaving the EU. We know that uncertainty is having an impact on long-term investment and decisions. The Chemical Industries Association and the Chemical Business Association have indicated that a significant number of their members are considering moving their operations out of the UK to preserve their European business.

I would certainly prefer to see us remaining in REACH. Again, in the current system planned under this statutory instrument, there is silence on enforcement responsibilities, compliance and whether we remain in lockstep with the EU REACH system. There is no real stakeholder involvement in who gets to decide on that, which I think is very detrimental to the UK’s competitiveness. REACH is the global gold standard in chemicals regulation, and it has been copied by South Korea, Turkey and the USA. My Committee visited the USA and heard about its Toxic Substances Control Act—which, sadly,
President Trump and his various Environmental Protection Agency heads have tried to row back on, but even the ToSCA is now about 10 to 15 years behind the EU.

To come on to the detail of the regulations, a very concerning deficiency in the statutory instrument is in relation to article 10 on the composition of the agency. We are not replicating the committees that inform decisions at the EU level, which will remove vital checks and balances in the form of stakeholder participation. ECHA has a management committee and technical committees, with stakeholders from industry, environmental and health non-governmental organisations, and trade unions permitted to participate in these meetings, but without a vote. There will be no such stakeholder participation in the UK chemicals agency, as formulated under this statutory instrument. This means that the best information will not be available for these discussions, and it will be ruled by fiat, rather than by discussion.

Article 76 of the original EU version created several committees, including one for risk assessment, one for socioeconomic analysis and a member state committee responsible for resolving potential divergences. The draft statutory instrument completely omits that article and replaces it with a much weaker duty to simply take scientific knowledge into account but with no formal standard mechanism comprising standing committees of experts to do so. We will have no committees of experts, or other committees, to take these registrations into account and help the agency to form its opinions.

The same deficiency appears elsewhere, including in relation to title 7 on authorisation. Article 58 concerns the inclusion of substances in annexe 14, but the duty to take into account the opinion of the member state committee is simply removed and the decision left to the Secretary of State. This is what my Committee has been warning against. Important democratic oversight mechanisms are being lost in translation and in the cut-and-paste process, and quietly, through the back door, in half-empty Chambers such as that in which we are sitting this evening, environmental regulation is simply being downgraded.

As I said earlier, I am very concerned about the budget. REACH was very expensive to set up. The Health and Safety Executive is going to run the UK version, which has experienced considerable budget cuts over the past 15 years. Its annual accounts indicate that it currently spends just over £1 million for chemicals regulation testing in the UK. Page 98 suggests that it receives £1.2 million for provision of REACH services to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, but that is a reduction from the £1.4 million it received in 2016-17. By contrast, I repeat that the spend per year for REACH is £100 million.

There is no commitment to mirror EU outcomes on chemical regulation. The draft statutory instrument has no automatic provision for copy across of EU restrictions and further improvements, so the UK’s controls on chemical use could rapidly diverge from those in the EU. If the UK fell behind those in the EU, protection of human health and the environment would be reduced. We do not want to end up in a situation where chemical regulation is diluted.

I have shared my concerns about the outcomes and the stakeholders. My final point relates to the Government’s better regulation agenda, which has a commitment to bring in regulations only if three times the amount of regulation, measured on the basis of cost to companies, is removed. My Committee has been pressing the Cabinet Office on the issue. In a written statement on 20 June 2018, the then Minister confirmed that the UK still has a deregulation target of £9 billion in this Parliament. That confirmed for the first time that the target would be applied to vast swathes of formerly EU law after the transition or implementation period.

All of the regulations are going to be subject to the bizarre and ridiculous one in, three out rule. If we want to strengthen environmental law, protect new organisms or habitats, or ban a new chemical, the UK must calculate the business cost and ignore the benefits, and then the Department concerned must justify how it fits with the overall reduction target. This rule creates a massive disincentive for Ministers, Departments and civil servants to improve regulation.

The National Audit Office report on DEFRA’s progress in implementing EU exit had grave concerns about the long-term function of the UK’s chemical regulatory system. It was very critical, although I acknowledge that some progress has been made. CHEM Trust told me in a meeting that it is also concerned about the rapid warning systems. UK environmental health officers could discover, for example, lead paint on children’s toys or dangerous chemicals in baby products and baby foods, but because of the downgrading of their work, and that of trading standards, we are no longer going out looking for those problems and are very reliant on colleagues in other EU member states alerted us to the need to take such products off the market.

In conclusion, we have been gravely concerned for the past two years. When people voted to leave the EU, they did not vote to have weaker chemical regulation standards or for UK companies to leave the country in order to have better access to EU markets and to have to pay twice for the same registrations. They certainly did not vote for a flood of cheap imports to come into this country without any customs checks or for our children to be less safe from toxic chemicals. I hope that that is not where we end up. It shows the need for us to have a proper transition period and to remain in the single market and the customs union, to avoid such a devastating outcome.

7.25 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I associate myself with the concerns raised by the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), by the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman), and by the Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson).

For those who raised the specific point about the risks of no deal, the most serious concerns could be avoided by the Government simply ruling it out. That is why it is so important for Parliament to assert its authority this week, to prevent the disaster of leaving the EU with no deal.

I will confine my main remarks to a question raised by Rolls-Royce, which contacted me in my capacity as Chair of the Select Committee on Science and Technology. I challenged the Minister during her opening remarks, but I have to say that I was not convinced or satisfied with her response so I want to return to the issue. The concern is that, as it stands, the draft statutory instrument looks as if it is flawed, and that flaw could have very serious consequences for UK companies.
The UK REACH SI takes account of a number of scenarios, addressing, for example, the issue of an EU authorisation held by a UK entity on which a UK downstream user is dependent and, equally, that of an EU authorisation held by an EEA entity on which a UK downstream user is dependent. However, it has been put to me that the scenario that is not addressed—I really would like the Minister to deal with this specifically—concerns an application for EU authorisation submitted by an EEA entity for which a decision has not yet been made and on which a UK downstream user is dependent.

According to Rolls-Royce, approximately 10 applications for authorisations to use or supply particular chemicals are waiting for a decision by the European Commission, which, as its decision-making process proceeds, takes advice from the European Chemicals Agency and from member states. The likelihood is that the applications currently submitted will not be decided by 29 March. The applications have been submitted by an EEA entity, not by a UK company. However, UK companies downstream in the supply chain—the end users of those chemicals—are reliant on the EEA manufacturer and supplier holding a current authorisation. In the event of no deal, if the EEA entity manufacturing and supplying the chemical to a UK company has not received its authorisation from the EU by 29 March, the UK company that uses that chemical would immediately become non-compliant with the UK REACH SI.

I would be delighted if the Minister intervened on me to address this specific question: what will happen to those companies, including many small and medium-sized enterprises that probably have no idea about all this complexity, that will immediately become non-compliant after 29 March? The consequences for them are potentially disastrous. They would be acting unlawfully in using those chemicals in this country after 29 March. I would be delighted if the Minister reassured the House now. If she is not able to do so, then this statutory instrument must be opposed because it will have devastating consequences, quite apart from the other concerns that have been expressed in this debate. I urge the Minister, who remains silent, to take this away, rethink it and ensure that it addresses those concerns properly and fully. Without doing so, there will be very serious consequences.

Mary Creagh: I, too, have been contacted by Rolls-Royce and Make UK, the former Engineering Employers’ Federation, which says that the chemicals affected—these in-flight chemicals, if you like—are a range of chromates using coatings, sealings, paints, primers and touch-up preparation, including chromium trioxide, which is used in the chrome plating industry and is significant for the automotive supply chain. It says that limiting the use of these substances would affect a wide range of component part manufacturers, processing houses, and maintenance and repair facilities, as well as other equipment manufacturers. This is exactly what the Environmental Audit Committee warned about two years ago: market freeze, where we simply freeze our automotive supply chains. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it is a heavily regulated industry such as aerospace people cannot just switch suppliers from one day to the next?

Norman Lamb: I do agree. One is left reaching the inevitable conclusion that this is chaotic. The party in government prides itself as being the party of business, yet it is putting very many companies in this country in an invidious—indeed, impossible—position unless that is properly clarified.

It is really important that this does not proceed. I know these issues will be raised in the House of Lords, but I hope that this House defeats these regulations this evening. I again urge the Government to withdraw and think again.

7.31 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): It is a real pleasure to follow the Chair of the Science and Technology Committee, the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), and my colleague the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh). If I was worried about this statutory instrument before I came into the Chamber this evening, I am even more worried now. As a general point, I cannot help but point out that it is simply extraordinary that 32 days before exit day and at the end of the article 50 deadline, the Government are only now seeking to pass this vital secondary legislation. This statutory instrument should in theory provide an absolutely minimum protection to human health and the natural world in the event of a catastrophic no deal. It is now almost three years since the referendum vote, the last-minute rushing through of these vital laws is unforgivable.

The protections offered by REACH and other EU-led regulatory regimes are not nice optional extras; they are the basics of a system designed to keep people healthy and to protect the environment not just in the UK and the EU but across the world. They create a common rule book and they set higher standards. Let us be clear: if the UK leaves the EU without a deal, without even a deal on chemicals, it will immediately lose access to REACH with seriously adverse consequences. In that scenario, the UK would lack a functioning system to regulate the use of chemicals.

One example, as we have been hearing, is that there is not yet a functioning UK-based IT system to replace REACH. That is truly, truly shocking. DEFRA has apparently spent £5.8 million on that new IT system, but it is not yet able to say whether it will be functioning by exit day. Anyone involved in public procurement and IT systems will tell you that if you are not quite sure three weeks from a particular deadline, then, actually, you are sure—it is not going to be ready in three weeks. DEFRA also confirmed that the Health and Safety Executive will run the database. As others have observed, however, the HSE has had a decade of cutbacks and staff losses. It is unclear whether it has the capacity or expertise to deliver. We need much greater clarity about the IT system. The Minister said earlier that a judgment would be made about it later this week. I urge her to bring a statement to this House, so we know whether that IT system will be up and running. If it is not, this House has a right to know that. We also have a right to know whether there is sufficient recruitment of staff at the HSE. What guarantees can she give that those staff have the relevant expertise and skills?

Aside from not yet having a functioning UK-based system, if we leave the EU without a deal we lose access to vital information on thousands of chemicals held in
the REACH database. All that data is subject to copyright. In the event of a no-deal Brexit, British companies would need to obtain permission to get that data back. The burden on the UK chemical industry would be huge, costing vast sums of money to either re-register the chemicals here in the UK, or, if unable to obtain key data, to re-test chemicals. Both of those processes would require using a yet-to-be-online IT system. What, if any, assurances can the Minister give to the thousands of companies across the UK who rely on REACH to operate their businesses? Will she admit that a no-deal Brexit and crashing out of REACH would represent a catastrophe for the UK chemicals industry?

We have heard figures about how important the industry is to the UK economy as a whole. It is the UK's second-biggest manufacturing industry, after the food and drink sector, and it employs half a million people in the UK. Some 61% of chemical exports went to the EU in 2017, with a value of £18 billion, and 73% of chemical imports came from the EU. UK companies hold 12,449 REACH registrations. To put that in context, that is 13% of the total. That includes about 5,700 substances, 26% of the total, and 1,773 companies, which is 12% of the total. Trade in chemicals is highly integrated with the rest of the EU. Complex supply chains mean that products often cross the UK-EU border multiple times. We simply cannot afford to be playing games with the livelihoods of thousands of workers in the chemicals industry. The Government absolutely must be in a position to provide those assurances now.

Those serious questions about our readiness to leave the EU aside, this SI, as others have said, contains a number of serious flaws. Many have been pointed out by a number of parliamentary Committees, both here in the Commons and in the other place, and they need to be addressed urgently. I just want to summarise a few of them again very quickly.

The SI confirms that the chemical regulation will be administered by the Health and Safety Executive, but does not commit to a budget or provide any assurance that the HSE will be equipped with the necessary skills and capacities. The working budget for the European Chemicals Agency is €100 million a year, compared to the roughly £2.2 million the HSE currently spends regularly on the REACH database. Given the recent budget cuts to the HSE, it is worth noting that it took the EU five years to fully staff the European Chemicals Agency. As it stands, DEFRA has not provided any analysis of the additional resources that the HSE, the Environment Agency or DEFRA itself might need to develop a UK-led chemical regulatory system.

Secondly, as the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee set out, the new system proposed in the SI strips away layers of supporting committees at EU level that are hugely important. They ensure decisions are based on the best scientific advice. The SI removes article 76, which establishes a committee for risk assessment, a committee for socio-economic analysis, and a member state committee “responsible for resolving potential divergences of opinions on draft decisions”.

Those committees allow for stakeholders from industry, non-governmental organisations and trade unions to help inform decisions. In this SI, all of that is replaced by the HSE to seek the recent budget cuts to the HSE, but no formal standing committees of experts and stakeholders to look at the scientific knowledge relating to chemicals.

That is simply not good enough. We need clear and accountable processes for industry, civil society and academia to feed into this process. Decisions cannot be made in a dark room without scrutiny and oversight. There are obvious changes that should have been made already, but even then serious questions remain about what the Government have been doing to prepare for leaving the EU.

I just want to echo the shadow Secretary of State’s concerns about animal testing. The idea that we would gratuitously redo tests, with all the pain and suffering of animals that that would include, is simply not conceivable. But that is what we would have to do if we cannot agree access to information in the REACH database. That would be senseless, needless and unacceptable. The EU referendum vote was not a mandate to increase animal suffering. What assurances can the Government provide to ensure that animal testing will not expand in the case of a no-deal Brexit?

This SI represents what is, in reality, a catastrophic failure on the part of this Government when it comes to Brexit. It is an example of how crashing out of the EU without a deal represents a huge blow to UK industry, as well as to vital protections for human health and the natural world. As well as as making the changes outlined by the Environmental Audit Committee and the Lords EU Select Committee, the Government must urgently take no deal off the table.

7.39 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): My constituency is home to some of the most complex international chemical companies in the world. It is a foundation industry that depends on smooth trading arrangements with the rest of the world—not just the EU—but from what I hear from the sector, it is clear that, as others have said, significant gaps remain in this statutory instrument. That is making the companies particularly nervous in relation to the movement of chemicals between the UK and other countries for all manner of manufacturing.

The Minister seems to think that a cosy chat, sitting down with the industrialists, is going to sort this, but it is not. The Chemical Industry Association tells me that while there is a limited two-year transition to register chemicals currently manufactured in the UK, there are no transitional arrangements in the SI for chemicals currently being imported to the UK from non-UK suppliers through third party-based representatives. In practice, that would mean that existing registrations would cease to exist, bringing a halt to imports from non-EU countries to the UK manufacturing sector after March.

Another concern expressed by the CIA is that there is no level playing field for all existing registration holders. As my hon. Friends the Members for Workington (Sue Hayman) and for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) said, the current approach in the SI forces existing UK suppliers to use a UK representative, and I add that they have to register within six months whereas all other existing duty holders have two years. For one UK-based multinational company, that will affect 400 chemicals that it is importing into the UK. It will inadvertently put UK importers, including those on Teeside, at a competitive disadvantage if they are unable to obtain information directly from the suppliers to register themselves. The CIA tells me that the process could be a
[Alex Cunningham]

lot more simplified and avoid additional compliance problems if all existing registration holders, including UK representatives of EU suppliers, could benefit from the two-year transitional arrangements. I hope that the Minister will consider that transition period very seriously indeed.

The Chemical Industries Association also says that the proposed timeframes are absolutely impossible to comply with. There are various timeframes to submit information to the UK regulator—120 days, 180 days and two years—all of which are unrealistic given that EU REACH provided 10 years to register and other global REACH regimes provide a much longer timeframe with a much smaller portfolio of substances.

In particular, the level of initial information that should be submitted within 120 days goes far beyond basic. To put this into context, that amounts to over 100 pages of information, including a detailed breakdown of composition for every chemical currently being manufactured or imported into the UK. Given that the objective is to confirm that a business legitimately owns an existing registration, the initial information needs to be kept to a minimum. I am told that the alternative would be to extend the existing timeframe to minimise the impact on businesses, who will have a number of Brexit-related challenges to overcome.

This brings me to the conclusion—we in the Opposition share this view—that the SI remains unfit for purpose. When we consider how many companies, goods and jobs are affected by it, we can be more than nervous about how it fails to provide the reassurances needed by industry. I had previously raised these shortfalls with the Prime Minister after one of her many EU discussion sessions and in my speech on the EU agreement, but there were no answers from the Prime Minister or the Minister answering the debate that day, and there have been no answers from this Minister today either. It is time they came up with answers.

I really feel that the Government ought to take this away today, listen again to what the sector has to say and come back to the House with those companies satisfied that they can do business under the regime that the Minister is proposing. Anything short of that and I believe it would be to extend the existing timeframe to minimise the impact on businesses, who will have a number of Brexit-related challenges to overcome.

A question was raised about intellectual property. It is fair to say that the intellectual property remains with the company that submits it, but if companies already own the data, they can of course submit that to UK REACH. If not, they will need to arrange access and, if they are forced to live with the chaos predicted. That is not good for the chemical industry, it is not good for Britain, and it is certainly not good for Teesside either.

7.44 pm

Dr Coffey: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to this debate. I assure the House that the Government remain committed to supporting all the aims of REACH: to ensure a continuing high level of protection of human health and the environment; to promote alternative, non-animal methods for assessing chemical hazards; and to promote the free circulation of chemicals and enhance competitiveness and innovation.

By putting the regulations in place, we will make sure that we can operate a UK REACH regime after leaving the European Union. We are working closely with the HSE and the EA, as well as other regulators, to prepare for that national regime so that the change is as smooth as possible. We know the functions that are needed. I hope that in my opening remarks, I was able to convey the information that we will be providing the resources to fund the staff that are needed. I remind the House that the HSE will be building on the expertise that it already has from acting as the UK competent authority in the EU system and that it will be recruiting more staff to reflect its new and expanded role, as indeed, is the EA.

I do not agree that the arrangements that the REACH SI provides for on scientific advice are in any way weak. The UK agency must publish its scientific opinions, and when forming those opinions on authorisations and restrictions, the HSE must commission scientific knowledge and advice from suitably qualified or experienced persons who are independent of the agency. In a particular case, for example, where ECHA had already published robust evidence, the HSE must publish its justification for deciding not to take further advice. I assure the House that the HSE is not limited to getting its scientific advice from the UK, or indeed, even the EU.

The HSE must consult on and publish a statement about how it will comply with all these duties. That must happen within three months of exit, so we intend to have arrangements in place in UK REACH to allow stakeholders to observe discussions and considerations where this scientific advice is provided.

Patricia Gibson: Will the Minister give way?

Mary Creagh: Will the Minister give way?

Dr Coffey: I will not be giving way in my closing remarks—[Interruption.] Well, I am trying to answer the questions that I have already been asked. On what industry needs to know to do, we have had extensive discussions with a number of businesses and trade associations. We have launched a business readiness campaign targeting downstream users, in particular, and we continue to engage with the industry in that regard.

A question was raised about intellectual property. It is fair to say that the intellectual property remains with the company that submits it, but if companies already own the data, they can of course submit that to UK REACH. If not, they will need to arrange access and, as I pointed out, some are already starting to do so. Some—mentioned CEFIC and the CIA in the UK—have encouraged their members with consortium registrations to make sure that they make that information readily available. Companies can, of course, employ ORs—only representatives—to hold a registration in the EU, just as they may do for access to other markets around the world, while maintaining their UK registration.

Patricia Gibson: Will the Minister give way?

Dr Coffey: I will not be giving way, as I have already made clear to the House. I am trying to answer the questions that I have already been provided with. On the other elements of registration, I am conscious that some companies have started to set up relationships with not only ORs, but other companies and to establish offices in the EU. Ireland is a particular favourite.

I want to clarify elements about animal testing—I know that this matters to the House. Within the EU—currently within ECHA—HSE and the EA have...
been at the forefront of pushing for alternatives to animal testing, and that will continue. UK REACH will continue to follow the “last resort” principle when it comes to possible animal testing. That works alongside other REACH drivers to reduce the amount of testing, for example, where industry must get the regulator’s agreement before carrying out a test. We will continue to work closely with the OECD to develop new alternatives so that we can understand chemical hazards without testing them on animals. We are determined that there should be no need for any additional animal testing for a chemical that has already been registered, unless it is subject to further evaluation that shows that the registration dossier is inadequate or that there are still concerns about the hazards and risks of the chemical.

The right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) asked particularly about Rolls-Royce and products that have not yet been authorised. The point is that the EU has not authorised those chemicals for use. Therefore, we cannot say that they will be authorised by the time we leave on 29 March and we will not have the position to allow for future EU decisions. HSE will work with companies to help them to get into compliance as soon as possible.

The hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) referred particularly to products that include chromium. I can categorically say that chromium is a clear carcinogen and it really matters that we have to keep strong controls on how it is used. That is why it concerns me that the Opposition are considering voting against this SI. I pointed out earlier that the Welsh Labour Government have endorsed this SI and want it to pass today. Without these regulations we would not have a chemical regulatory regime that was effective in maintaining human health, and the environment would be put at risk, which makes me even more astonished that the Green party would back that regime that was effective in maintaining human health.

We need to make sure that our regulators have the tools to understand the hazards of the chemicals that we use, and without this SI we would not have the information available on how to mitigate those risks. I invite the House to approve the regulations.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 297, Noes 240.

Division No. 337] [7.50 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Stephen
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Braverman, Suella
Breerton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brookeshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Caims, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chiashi, Rehman
Clark, Colin
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crab, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djungloy, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Elwood, rh Mr Tobias
Ephnicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennnett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Gamier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Girvan, Paul
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halton, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollonborne, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seena
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
Tellers for the Ayes:
Jo Churchill and
Michelle Donelan

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Heidi
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amess, Mike
Antoniassi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alastair
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cumnings, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Nic
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Elford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Ellman, Dame Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hiller, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Holllern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hu, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Khan, Atzal
Kilien, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, lan
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Leewill-Buck, rh Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly (Proxy vote cast by Mark Tami)
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
Means, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved.

That the draft REACH etc. (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 5 February, be approved.

Backbench Business

Macpherson Report: 20th Anniversary

8.6 pm

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

That this House notes the twentieth anniversary of the publication of the Macpherson Report on the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry on 24 February 2019; and calls on the Government and all in public life to renew their commitment to fulfilling the recommendations of the Macpherson Report.

Twenty years ago yesterday, the Stephen Lawrence inquiry reported its findings. Last year saw the country mark a more tragic anniversary: it was 25 years since Stephen was killed in a brutal racist attack in Eltham, south London, on 22 April 1993. He was 18 years old. The chair of the inquiry, Sir William Macpherson, and his advisers later concluded:

“Stephen Lawrence’s murder was simply and solely and unequivocally motivated by racism.”

That date also marked the start of a long battle for justice by Stephen’s family. Their courage and dignity in the face of everything that they have faced is extraordinary, and should constitute a call to action for all of us. For the purpose of my speech, I have drawn extensively on Baroness and Dr Lawrence’s work, as well as their contributions to the ongoing Home Affairs Committee inquiry. I have also drawn from the work of—and stood on the shoulders of—my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford), who worked so hard to get the inquiry off the ground. I salute his work today.

Looking ahead to this anniversary, the Home Affairs Committee, of which I am a member, began to scope an inquiry last year. We have taken written evidence, and earlier this month we held our first oral evidence session. We heard from Baroness Lawrence, and from representatives of black and minority ethnic policing bodies. We look forward to taking further evidence in the coming months.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. I would contribute to it by making a speech, but unfortunately it clashes with an event that I planned several months ago, which I am chairing and to which I shall return in a second. First, however, let me say this to my hon. Friend.

One of my reflections on the inquiry is that as time has gone by—and it is 20 years into the past—we have lost our focus on the lessons that Macpherson taught us. Some of our public services are not sufficiently aware of the issues surrounding racism and racial tension in some of our communities. I think we need to think again about some of them, and I hope that the Committee will refocus people’s attention on the lessons of Macpherson so that our public services can once again give those issues the priority that they must be given.

Alex Norris: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I was about to come to exactly that point.

The Macpherson report presented 70 recommendations to the Home Office, police forces and other public bodies. Baroness Lawrence told us that she had tried to find out how many had been implemented before coming to see our Committee, but had struggled to find the information that she needed. She said:
It seems as if things have become really stagnant and nothing seems to have moved. So are we really learning the lessons?

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): That raises a question about the Metropolitan police: why has it taken them about 20 years to start an inquiry into, according to the press, between 10 and 12 officers? That suggests to me the Metropolitan police have still not got on top of this problem.

Alex Norris: That is one of the reasons for the Select Committee’s work on this. We are at the early stages and so have not yet drawn any conclusions, but a real and clear audit against the recommendations for both the Metropolitan police and other organisations would be timely. In starting this debate I intend to run through some of the evidence we have seen so far, on just four or so topics.

The phrase “institutional racism” is synonymous with the Macpherson report, which concluded that institutional racism existed in the Metropolitan Police Service, other police services and other institutions countrywide, citing factors such as the Lawrence family’s treatment by the police, the disparity in stop-and-search figures, the under-reporting of racial incidents nationwide and the failure of the police to provide officers with racism awareness or race relations training.

So how far have we come since then, 20 years on?

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that sometimes people talk about the use of the phrase “institutional racism” as if people are saying every single person in the institution in question is a racist, whereas that phrase refers to the workings of institutions that turn out to the disadvantage of black people and others?

Alex Norris: I absolutely agree. I said the phrase was synonymous with the Macpherson report because that report is what made the phrase a part of public life, and the phrase was added that “if I was marking policing I would give us a C at the moment”.

Baroness Lawrence highlighted the education system as somewhere where black people continually do not have the same outcomes as their white counterparts, and Bevan Powell, one of the founding members of the NBPA, said:

“This is an awful lot better. But what about the people who do not have a single black woman police officer, and across the force in total the number of black female officers has increased by 34 in the last 10 years—not 34%, but 34 individuals. That is astounding.”

Alex Norris: Yes, the Committee has heard that there are disproportionately concentrated at lower ranks, and based on current rates of progression it will be 2052 before the police service represents the population it serves. In pulling this speech together I was shocked to learn that 13 of the 43 forces in England and Wales do not have a single black woman police officer, and across the collective number of black female officers has increased by 34 in the last 10 years—not 34%, but 34 individuals. That is astounding.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that there appear to be a disproportionate number of black and ethnic minority police officers above the rank of superintendent under investigation? There appears to be a feeling that they are discriminated against in the profession, which obviously undermines the authority and legitimacy of police forces for them to fail to represent the communities they serve. Let’s face it, I am not the first person to stand up in this Chamber and say that. But what are we actually doing to change this? People will look to us for leadership and expect that we effect change.
Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): May I echo others’ praise of my hon. Friend for securing this debate? One of the most senior BME officers to serve in the Metropolitan police was Chief Superintendent Dal Babu, who led the police in the London Borough of Harrow. The Minister will remember his excellent service in our communities. He has said publicly that he launched a mentoring and support programme for other officers from a BME background and had that initiative rubbish by senior officers. Is that attitude not part of the challenge we face, and should we expect not only Ministers but senior figures in the Metropolitan police to continue to challenge it?

Alex Norris: We will start to see things genuinely changing when we start to see such initiatives embraced. The idea that doing the same things will get us the same outcomes is hardly a revolutionary concept, but people are too slow to grasp that.

The Macpherson report criticised the disproportionality of stop-and-search, stating that “we are clear that the perception and experience of the minority communities that discrimination is a major element in the stop and search problem is correct”.

One of the performance indicators recommended for measuring progress against the ministerial priority was “the policy directives governing stop and search procedures and their outcomes”.

Again, I fear we have gone too quiet on that, not least because recent figures suggest that race disproportionality in stop-and-search is actually worse now than it was 20 years ago, although improved recording practices may well have had an impact on that. Still, the latest figures show that black people are nine and a half times more likely than white people to be stopped and searched.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): We often hear that having too many stop-and-searches of members of the black community, especially black males, is affecting the community and its relationship with the police. That can then make it very difficult for people from a black culture and ethnic background to be able to trust the police, so we need to do more on building that relationship between black communities and the police.

Alex Norris: I absolutely agree. I dare say I may have taken part in this at some point, but as a body politic we have a dishonest conversation about stop-and-search. When we are in a community hall faced by parents or individuals who are angry about disproportionality we wring our hands and say it must change, but the moment something happens—somebody is stabbed, for example—we run to this place or the nearest camera and say, “Oh goodness, this can’t happen this way; we have to do more stopping and searching.” We must have an honest conversation in this country. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) has been steadfast in this regard for many decades; we could all learn something from that. We ought to have a much more mature conversation with people in our community.

I can offer some hope from my own police force of Nottinghamshire. Our stop-and-search rates are among the lowest in the country; but due to intelligence-led use of stop-and-search powers our current 41% arrest and positive outcome rate is one of the highest in the country. We should reflect on that: one of the lowest stop-and-search rates produces one of the highest success rates. It is probably not a major surprise that our excellent police and crime commissioner, Paddy Tipping, who is behind this, was also involved in setting up the Macpherson inquiry. He gets it, and we now need more people to join him.

Finally, before I sit down and give others a chance to speak, I want to turn to governance and oversight. Earlier, I referred to Baroness Lawrence’s frustration at the difficulty in finding out what progress has been made against the Macpherson report’s recommendations. We as a Committee intend to address that by writing to the Home Office and other bodies to ask for updates against all 70 recommendations. Frankly, though, the Government should not be leaving this to us. They have been criticised for a lack of governance and oversight. The Stephen Lawrence steering group was disbanded many years ago, and in 2012, Bevan Powell called for the re-establishment of a pan-Whitehall group to restore trust between the police and communities.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and setting out very powerfully the key issues in the Macpherson report that are still being raised 20 years on. As he says, the Home Affairs Committee is looking again at all the issues around diversity and policing, and around institutional racism, that were raised at the time. When we heard evidence from Baroness Lawrence, we asked her what she wanted Stephen Lawrence’s legacy to be. She mentioned Stephen Lawrence Day, the first of which will be in April. We also asked her what she most wanted to change, and she answered that we should change how we treat our young people, because they are our future. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important for us to look forward at the positive legacy of Stephen’s life and, on Stephen Lawrence Day, for us to celebrate what more we can do in the future as well as bringing about the changes that we still need to make after 20 years?

Alex Norris: I am grateful to the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee for that intervention. She and I and many others were keen for this debate to take place now, around the anniversary of the inquiry, rather than around Stephen Lawrence Day, because the family are very clear about what they want the day to be, and about the positives to be gained from it. I am glad that we are able to honour it in that way, and I will certainly be participating fully and supporting the family in their really important goal.

I shall quote something that Bevan Powell said to us, and this is certainly something for the Chair of the Committee to consider. He stated:

“The only time the police seem to respond to the recommendations and the associated issues that came out of Macpherson is when there is a Home Affairs Committee or a public inquiry of some sort. That cannot be the case.”

Our Committee’s recent report, “Policing for the Future”, criticised the extent to which the Home Office had stepped away from policing policy, with the Department being widely criticised by policing stakeholders and the National Audit Office for its lack of leadership. I am glad to see the Policing Minister in his place. I know that he is a man motivated by a strong sense of duty and decency and a believer in the importance of public service. In that spirit, I say to him that we are crying out for a much more mature conversation with people in our community.
for someone on the Government Front Bench to grab hold of the lessons learned from the Macpherson inquiry and to finish the job, audit progress, reconvene a steering group and drive this forward. I really would not worry about the partisan risk in doing that. Frankly, there will be enough blame to go around: we will all have our share.

Tim Loughton: I want to take up the hon. Gentleman’s point about young people. A report produced a few years ago by the all-party parliamentary group for children on the relationship between young people and the police made some recommendations which, to give them their due, the Government took up and changed the law. The shocking finding from that report was the lack of confidence in the police among young people, particularly those from BME communities. There always used to be confidence in the police among young people—we all remember the friendly bobby coming to our school—but if we can no longer instil that confidence in people at a young age, that does not bode well for adults having confidence in the police. We need to do so much better in that regard, and it should not just be down to all-party groups and our Select Committee to bring about that change.

Alex Norris: I appreciate that intervention from the hon. Gentleman. That lack of confidence has been seen across the piece. All young people have less confidence in the police than we do, on average, and that is a toxic situation. It means that reporting is not as strong as it could be, that people are not as willing as they should be to say when they are scared for their own safety, and that they are less likely to think of the police as a profession that is for them. The situation is toxic across the piece.

During our careers, a lot of us will have had a “never again” moment. Perhaps it has involved sitting with a bereaved parent talking about the loss of their child. That happened to me in my first couple of months as a councillor in 2011. I sat there feeling impotent, and I wished I could take the pain away, but I could not. At that time, I thought “never again”, but that feeling dissipates over time. I have to tell colleagues and friends today that this is what “never again” is. It is grasping the moment and using our privileged position to say, “Here are 70 ways in which we were told that things would be, that people are not as willing as they should be to say when they are scared for their own safety, and that they are less likely to think of the police as a profession that is for them. The situation is toxic across the piece.”

8.24 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), and I was delighted to sponsor the debate, along with him, coming to the Chamber tonight. It is important that the Backbench Business Committee found the time for it to take place here on the day after the anniversary of the Macpherson report. This will be a useful examination of where we are as a Parliament, both looking back and looking forward. A number of the interventions that we had this evening are things that I said in the Select Committee when we held our first evidence session on this issue. I think that they are worth repeating in the Chamber tonight.

When we questioned Baroness Lawrence, I said that I had still been at school when Stephen Lawrence was murdered. I cannot for the life of me remember his actual murder, and I do not remember seeing the news in the days and weeks after it, but I almost feel as though I have grown up with the Stephen Lawrence murder and the different investigations and trials—failed and successful—that have taken place. Sadly, this has been a part of British life, and it was part of my childhood as I grew up. This shows the importance of one man’s tragic death and what it meant to his family, and why, decades later, we are still speaking about Stephen Lawrence’s death and also his legacy, which I shall come on to in a moment.

In the Select Committee, I also mentioned a fascinating documentary that many people have seen, “The Murder that Changed a Nation”. It was compelling viewing for many reasons. It showed how, had it not been for a number of critical interventions, we might not have been standing here in Parliament tonight talking about a crime that had been solved or about the positive aspects of Stephen Lawrence’s legacy. We may still have been discussing much of the tragedy.

What would have happened had it not been for a very determined family? Baroness Lawrence and Neville Lawrence fought day in, day out, to get justice for their son, but they should not have had to. They should have been grieving like any other parents would have been in those tragic circumstances, but they were not given the opportunity to grieve, because they had to fight for justice for their son. They did not just have to fight for a few days or weeks; they have fought for decades and continue to fight. That is simply not good enough.

Another aspect that occurred just by chance was the discussion, meeting and publicity with Nelson Mandela. Had that not happened—had Nelson Mandela not met the family and said what he did—perhaps the case would not have got the publicity it clearly deserved. I am glad the Policing Minister is here to respond to tonight’s debate, because although we must never forget that there is rightly much criticism of policing in the Stephen Lawrence inquiry, it were not for the dedicated service of Clive Driscoll, a police officer, we may never have got the justice that Stephen rightly deserved. This police officer was told, “Take these files about the Stephen Lawrence inquiry. Your job is to shred them, to destroy them, to get rid of them.” As he was going to go about his duty, he looked at these files and his suspicions grew stronger and stronger. That officer was very alarmed at what he saw and read, and he knew that it was possible to get from these files justice and ultimately the convictions we have seen of the two men found guilty of Stephen Lawrence’s murder. But for that police officer, and others who were determined that the previous failings of the police, which are well-known, would be overcome at some stage, we may not have been in that place.

I have spoken for a few minutes about coincidences, but for which we may not have got to the stage we are at now. The final one is Neville Lawrence’s relationship with the editor of the Daily Mail and, thus, its headline in February 1997. How can it be that a country such as the United Kingdom, even in the late 1990s, relied on a frank and startling front page of a newspaper that only really came about because the editor—had it been anyone else at the newspaper this would not have happened—knew Neville Lawrence, had listened to him and had been
shocked at what he heard? This editor decided that despite the legal representations made to the newspaper saying, “You cannot print a front page like that”, he would go ahead and do it.

As I was preparing for this debate, I thought again about how they are just four examples of things that could have easily gone the other way. We may have had a family who were so steeped in mourning that they could not have pursued this with as much vigour as the Lawrence family did. We may have had a police officer who did shred those files. We may never had the meeting between Nelson Mandela and the family. And we may never had that front-page article. Where would we have been as a country if those four incidents had not happened? I shudder to think where we would have been.

Let us now look at where we are. I was privileged to serve on the Select Committee with other Members who are here this evening and to hear evidence from Baroness Lawrence. Right at the beginning of her evidence session, she said that it seems as though “nothing seems to have moved.”

We looked at the 70 recommendations from the Macpherson inquiry and judged whether they had been met, partially met or not met, and whether they had been met within any specific timescale. I would be interested to hear the Minister’s response to this, because Baroness Lawrence was very critical and very clear in her view that they had not been met; this has fallen by the wayside.

I then looked back at the previous Home Affairs Committee report on this, “The Macpherson Report—Ten Years On”, which was published on 14 July 2009. It said that “67 of Macpherson’s 70 recommendations have been implemented fully or in part.”

How could one Committee think that, whereas at the very start of our inquiry, looking at the same report 20 years on, we are finding confusion and uncertainty on how to judge whether these recommendations have been enacted, followed and met, fully or in part? We as a Parliament and the public need to know how we assess the progress of these reports. It is right that the Macpherson inquiry went into great detail, took a considerable amount of evidence and came up with a stark report with recommendations that were going to root out the problems seen in the Stephen Lawrence murder and thereafter. How can parliamentarians and our constituents have faith that these reports do not just sit on a shelf, and do not get produced to great fanfare but on we are getting clear evidence from one of the people most involved in this incident that things have not moved on. Baroness Lawrence is saying that it seems that nothing has moved on.

Tim Loughton: My hon. Friend is making a fascinating speech and I congratulate him on that. Is a measure of whether things have been moving on, be it over 10 years, 20 years or whatever, not the confidence that certain communities have in their police force? One particularly depressing factor is that although confidence in the local police has risen among most communities, those from the black Caribbean community remain stubbornly at the bottom in terms of those who have least confidence in their police; the comparable numbers over the past 10 years have moved very little. If we cannot convince those members of our community that things have improved, clearly we need to listen to the reasons why they do not think they have improved and do something rather more about it than we have.

Douglas Ross: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend, who serves diligently on the Home Affairs Committee and has heard the evidence that agrees with the point he is making. As well as hearing from Baroness Lawrence, we heard from a number of black, Asian and minority ethnic officers about the problems they face. His point about how people in the BAME communities respond to the police was reflected in some of that evidence, in that the police force they look to for support does not reflect them. That is a problem.

I want briefly to turn to recruitment and retention, which the hon. Member for Nottingham North and my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) mentioned. Although we are rightly focusing on the 41 forces in England and Wales this evening, I represent a Scottish constituency, and if I may I would like to look at Police Scotland, because it is interesting to see how things work in the round. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests; my wife is a serving police officer. I welcome the increase of over 10% in Scotland’s police recruits from minority ethnic backgrounds in 2017, but if we look at recruitment on its own, we will not understand the full picture. Equally important is the retention of police officers and staff, as well as promotion.

It is unfortunate that none of Police Scotland’s executive team come from a black and ethnic minority background. We have had Police Scotland for almost five years, and it would be good to see promotion throughout the ranks. I am not saying that that will not happen—this is not a criticism, just an observation that it would be good to see that—but we had witnesses coming along to our Select Committee who had put themselves forward as candidates to be sergeants or inspectors and who said that they felt that on paper they were as good as anyone else, but who were not promoted. It is all well and good saying that we have x number of people from BAME backgrounds in a police force, but if they believe that their future progression in that force will not be as bright, fast or positive as that of others, then we have a problem. If our sergeants and inspectors leading policing teams are not reflective of the communities that they are serving, then we have a problem.

In a written submission to the Scottish Parliament’s Justice Sub-Committee on Policing, the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights raises the problem of retention not just of officers, but of BAME staff once recruited, stating:

“There is no point in bettering recruitment if...officers and staff continue to leave Police Scotland in high proportions.”

We need more information, whether from exit interviews or better data, to understand why people leave the force. It is all well and good recruiting people to become police officers, whether in the Met, across England and Wales or in Police Scotland, but if, once they get there, they decide for whatever reason that they have to leave and do not feel at home in any of these police forces, we need to know why.

This may or may not be a controversial point, but we also need to do more than simply training officers.
Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making some moving points about bias and discrimination. Does he agree that unconscious bias can be something that people have not thought of, that it needs stamping on, in addition to the policies that he mentions, and that more training is needed at all levels of the police?

Douglas Ross: I am grateful for the hon. Lady’s points. I say this to her gently, but she might be even more impressed when she hears some of my speech, now that she has entered the Chamber.

I agree with the point about unconscious bias, but the point I was coming to was about training. Whether training is for unconscious bias or to improve officers’ interactions or responses to racial incidents, it cannot simply be a tick-box exercise. We cannot simply say, “Go online, enter this portal, and at the end of it”—maybe five or 10 minutes later—“click the ‘submit’ button and suddenly you are racially trained.”

“Are you trained to deal with racial incidents?” or, “Are you trained to deal with communities from BAME backgrounds?” I have a serious concern that those at the top of the police in all parts of the United Kingdom think that they are achieving what we want them to because they can say, “100% of our officers are trained in x,” or, “We have ensured that this is done at the policing training college,” in Tulliallan in Scotland or elsewhere.

If that training does not have a lasting impact among new recruits or officers, it is quite simply a waste of time, because we are not getting to the root of the problem and ensuring that we can enhance opinions. We have to look at the training element of all this, rather than trying to tick a box and saying, “It’s done. Move on and concentrate on the rest.”

Again, we heard in evidence to our Select Committee that some tutors at those colleges were basically saying, “Do this bit and then you can get on to that and the end of it”—maybe five or 10 minutes later. That is basically saying: “You don’t have to worry about it. You just have to do this to pass and then you move on to the rest.”

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that a really good training process will have enough leeway to ensure that people who do not make the grade do not end up as police officers and that in order to do that we need the resources to recruit slightly more police officers than we actually need?

Douglas Ross: That takes us to another level. In order to say to someone that they are not allowed to be a police officer because, in our interpretation, they have failed a test, we need to have a far more rigorous test. It cannot simply be this multiple choice exercise, which is completed online and submitted, and if a person gets above or below 50%, they are accepted or otherwise. If someone failed, and the tutors did not believe that they had met the racial training, we would have to look at why. Why would someone want to be a police officer and, when they get into a position of great power, use that power against the communities that we should all be there to support? I worry about that, but we do have to consider seriously how we train and recruit officers.

I know that Members representing English and Welsh constituencies discuss police numbers, but it is not an issue for them alone; we have the same in Scotland. Although I am grateful that the SNP Scottish Government agreed with the Scottish Conservatives in 2007 to increase the number of police officers in Scotland by 1,000, it was an agreement that the two parties had to make to get the budget through at a time of a minority Scottish Government. That was an important policy for the Scottish Conservatives to get enacted. We are always looking for more police officers, especially in my area, which is not in the central belt of Scotland. Moray, which was formerly policed by Grampian police, could always do with more officers to ensure that we can see more on the beat.

Janet Daby: I am really interested in what the hon. Gentleman is saying about the types of training that police officers should have. I very much believe that training needs to happen in every tier within the police force. I am interested to hear about other forms of training, about how he thinks that training should and could be delivered and about how it would be resourced.

In Lewisham, an organisation called Second Wave engages with young men and women within the community. It is a drama group, but it delivers training for police officers and it pairs up training with new recruits. The organisation has been flagged up as providing excellent training and, clearly, it is something that we should consider further.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. That was a little long for an intervention.

Douglas Ross: The intervention may have been a little long, but it made a very valuable point. I thought that I might be seen as a little controversial tonight, but clearly I am not, as there seems to be agreement across the House that there are issues with the training. That is not to dismiss what is currently being done, but we could go further, and I think that that was the hon. Lady’s point. Whether we are talking about her local group in Lewisham or others elsewhere, we must look at every way in which to educate. It should not be just a one-off. We cannot say that an officer’s racial equality training is done once they start their career. That person could be in post for 30 or 40 years, and, by the end of their career, they could be in a very senior position within the force. We should ensure that they undergo continuous development, not just a one-off training course, then saying, “That’s it. Done. Move on to the next stage in your training.”

I also want to look at the percentage of police officers both in Scotland and across the rest of the country from a black, Asian and minority ethnic background. Clearly, that is something that the Macpherson inquiry looked at with great interest, and something with which we are still trying to grapple. We have not achieved the successes in that area that we should have done. Again, going back to evidence in Scotland, the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights states that 1% of police officers, police staff and special constables come from BAME background. That has remained pretty much unchanged for six years. Therefore, 1% of all levels within the police—whether it be police officers, police staff or special constables—come from BAME backgrounds. That compares with the fact that minority ethnic groups in Scotland now represent 4% of the population, which has doubled from 2% in 2001. These figures vary wildly in many parts of the country, but there are underlying issues that we need to consider. I mentioned figures elsewhere in the country, and figures for England differ in various parts. The Metropolitan police has 13% of officers from ethnic minority
backgrounds, but 43% of the population in the Met area is from an ethnic minority background, so we really need to look at that for the future. We need a modern police force to reflect the diversity of a modern Scotland and a modern United Kingdom, and that requires an altogether different approach to recruiting officers and, crucially, retaining them.

I turn to other evidence that the Committee has received in our ongoing inquiry into the 20th anniversary of the Macpherson report. Although we have had only one oral evidence session, I have been looking at the written evidence submitted by groups including Liberty, which submitted a detailed response to our call for evidence. However, one response stood out for me and it was from someone called Mr Chris Hobbs, who wrote at the very top of his submission to the Home Affairs Committee:

“I have my doubts as to whether submissions from retired police officers such as myself, will be given due consideration or play any part in the HASC final report."

That is a sad reflection. Mr Hobbs attached an article that he wrote for an online newspaper some years ago, but his view was, “I’m not even going to bother submitting this because the Home Affairs Committee won’t be interested.” He felt that we would not be interested in his views because he was not from a BAME background. The message has to get out very clearly that we want the Macpherson inquiry to improve policing for everyone, not simply those from BME groups. They are crucial in this, but unless we listen to everyone in the police force, more anger will build up among officers who do not come from BME backgrounds as well as those who do. That piece of evidence shows that it is important for us to look at the whole policing sector.

Whether people agree or disagree with Mr Hobbs’s submission—I am not saying what I think because I have not read the full article—he should at least be content to know that it has been received and will be considered. We may ultimately disagree with everything that he says in his submission and how it relates to the Macpherson inquiry, but we cannot and will not just completely ignore it.

Mr Hobbs makes one point in his submission that is outwith the article, saying that he does not know of any officer “who does not wish to see more BAME officers recruited”. That is a positive element of his submission, but he also says that efforts to increase recruitment of every sector into policing is hampered by consistent negativity from politicians of all sides. I hope that we do not lower tonight’s debate to that level.

I want to discuss the legacy of Stephen Lawrence and his death, which was mentioned by the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee in her intervention on the hon. Member for Nottingham North. When the Committee was hearing evidence, I asked Baroness Lawrence what we should consider and have in our minds every year when we recognise Stephen Lawrence Day, and Baroness Lawrence said, “Positives.” She said that we should think about positives on Stephen Lawrence Day, and she continued:

“Stephen’s name has helped to change society in a way that I do not think anything has done in a long time...Stephen was somebody who loved being at school. That is part of his life that was all positive. That is what we want to see young people trying to embrace—all the positive stuff... law has been changed because of his name, but if we as a family had not pushed, none of that would have happened. As young people grow up, they need to see what you can do, and what difference you can make within society.”

That was the compelling evidence of a family who have been grieving for decades and continue to grieve the tragic loss of their son, but who still want to see positivity at the end of that experience.

I looked for the family’s reaction to the announcement that there would be a Stephen Lawrence Day, and Neville Lawrence—Stephen’s father—said that the annual commemoration of Stephen’s life is “a mark of what we have been trying to do for years—our son’s memory is going to be enshrined in history”.

The English philosopher Francis Bacon said:

“In order for the light to shine...the darkness must be present.”

The darkness of Stephen Lawrence’s death will always be with his family and his friends, and with this country, but his legacy will continue to burn very brightly because of what he did in his all-too-short life and what his family have continued to do since his death.

8.50 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) on securing this important debate and thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

I, too, pay tribute to Baroness Lawrence and Dr Lawrence for the time they have spent, when they should have been grieving for the loss of their son, in their tireless fight, for decades, in pursuing justice for him. They have been pursuing justice for their son Stephen but also for any other person whose life could potentially have been lost in exactly the same way. Their fight was for justice for their black son but also for black people across this country who, but for these attacks, would still be here. Doreen and Neville Lawrence’s son was taken from them because of the colour of his skin. His murder was motivated by hate.

As the Macpherson report showed, Stephen was failed by institutions that should have been there to protect him, but also should then have investigated the murder and eventually brought the perpetrators to justice. He was failed because of the colour of his skin. As the report identified, it was due to institutional racism. While that phrase is common and well used now, back when the Macpherson report first came out it was probably the first time that it was introduced. The report said that the Metropolitan police force was institutionally racist—a damning indictment, and rightly so, of the establishment of the time. The inquiry was due to the courageous work that the Labour party did prior to coming into power and the courageous Labour Government who called for it to take place. We should not forget the hard work that went into bringing about that inquiry.

I was still quite a young teenager when Stephen was killed. I was not in London—I lived in Bristol—but I remember it so clearly. We all remember the images of his parents constantly fighting for justice and for an inquiry to take place, but there had been no positive outcome. Having got to the point of having the report, which came up with 70 recommendations, it is quite unacceptable, and actually disgraceful, that 20 years on we are unable to measure where we are up to with those
recommendations. I will not repeat what my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North has already said, but I do hope that the Minister will add that point, because it is really important. If we are not going to audit and follow up on the report’s recommendations, then what was the point in having it in the first place?

We have to salute the fight that Baroness Lawrence has continued, and I will continue to do so, but progress has been very slow. We saw that in the recent report by the London School of Economics, which showed that black Britons are stopped at more than eight times the rate of white Britons. That is just not acceptable. I appreciate that the police must do their job. As the representative of a constituency in inner London, I have had to experience the loss of life of three men in the past six months, and that has not been good. I went to see those families and I literally had no words for them because their children had been failed by the system.

We also have to look at the gangs matrix, because many see it as a form of discrimination or racial profiling—picking out young black men because they listen to a certain type of music or because they access certain social media. Although the Met’s own figures show that just 27% of serious youth violence is committed by young black men, more than three-quarters of those on the gangs matrix are black. There is a disparity there that obviously needs to be addressed. That racial discrimination was even condemned by Amnesty International on the grounds that it leaves Britain in breach of some of its human rights obligations.

But racism is not limited to Government Departments, or just to the Government. Although progress has been made, racism still exists in society. We saw that in the hostile environment policies that led to the Windrush scandal last year. When we introduce policies, it is important that they are fully tested and audited, with impact assessments carried out, because anything that disproportionately affects a particular group clearly is not right. We know from the Windrush scandal that people were deported in error, lost their homes in error and lost out on vital social security in error, and many are still paying the price.

Nobody in this House would say that we live in a post-racial society, because that is not the case. I encourage the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) and others to think about how we move forward from the Macpherson report, particularly for our young black men because they are disproportionately affected, particularly in London, by what happens in this House. We see it in the education system and we see it in our community services.

Many of us on both sides of the House, as well as people in my community and in the country at large, will be marking Stephen Lawrence Day. What Baroness Lawrence said is so important, because young people are the future. They are the next generation, and we must give them that future and that opportunity, and we must give them hope. It is our responsibility.

8.57 pm

**Sir Edward Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova). Her concluding remarks about the importance of giving our young people hope, and showing that we have made progress and learned the lessons of the past, is essential. I will talk about both the positives and the negatives as we assess the situation in our country, particularly with respect to the police and whether we have learned and implemented the lessons.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris). I was brought up in north Nottingham, so it is a privilege to hear his remarks. He and the members of the Home Affairs Committee do a good job in reminding us that we must continue to pay attention to these critical issues.

Inevitably, hon. Members on both sides of the House have paid tribute to Baroness Lawrence and Dr Lawrence, without whom this country would not have focused on these important lessons. Their bravery, courage, determination and persistence deserve huge tribute, and I know they have done it as a tribute to their son. We should thank them today.

As the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) said, Baroness Lawrence wants to know where the positives are, and it is important to mention some of the positives. Our country, particularly the capital, has seen so many murders by stabbing, and we are seeing some of the lessons learned from the Macpherson report applied to those appalling murder investigations.

In my constituency, two young men from black and minority ethnic communities have been murdered with knives in the past two years. I have witnessed how those murder investigations have been conducted, and lessons have been learned, and we have seen that in practice. Of course, I wish that there was no need for murder investigations at all, but they have improved by reaching out to the affected communities. Communities have been given confidence that there is genuine independence, that investigations are reviewed, and that there is a team approach as opposed to things coming down to one individual, which was part of what went wrong in the original investigation into the Stephen Lawrence murder. There has been some improvement, but of course we just wish there were not so many murders to be investigated.

The role of the family liaison officer came from the report and is incredibly significant, and some of our amazing FLOs do important work in managing the grief of a victim’s whole family.

**Sandy Martin:** Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that much of the focus on the problems of gang violence and young people being targeted by criminals has fallen on the police force? However, an awful lot could and should have been done with youth and social services that might have helped to prevent some of the violence that we are seeing now.

**Sir Edward Davey:** I absolutely agree, and I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention.

Some of the changes that we have seen are the mechanical and policy changes that were the least we could have expected. In reading the material 20 years on, my concern is that we still need some deeper changes, and they relate to culture and attitudes. We had a good exchange about training off the back of the speech from the hon. Member for Moray, and one problem with training is that it can be a tick-box
exercise and does not go deep enough and get to what is in people’s hearts and minds. That applies not just to the police force, but to wider society.

I genuinely worry that the reason why we are not making progress in the police force is because we are not making progress in society, and I have to say that I feel that there is more racism today than there was a few years ago. I think we are going backwards, and that relates to how race is being portrayed in the media and—I am not going to bring Brexit into this—to some of the issues that may have contributed to Brexit. Some of those things have unleashed feelings and voices that I do not think we heard a few years ago, and that is regressive. As we mark this important anniversary and look to the police to do a lot better, we need to do better as a society. This is a deep issue.

While there has, of course, been progress and while we have seen some recommendations implemented, I am afraid that we have gone backwards in several areas. That is the truth. I look forward to the Home Affairs Committee’s full report so that we can compare and contrast it with the report published on the 10th anniversary, and I wonder whether it will be as positive. According to the crime survey for England and Wales, only 50% of Black Caribbean people agree with the statement “police would treat you fairly” compared with 68% of white people. That is quite a big difference, and that is based on people’s experiences.

Stop-and-search is being used more now than it was back when Stephen Lawrence was murdered, and parts of this House are putting pressure on Home Office Ministers to go back to using more stop-and-search as if it is the answer. We have huge amounts of evidence to suggest that stop-and-search is not going to find the criminals. If we are going to stop and search people, it is much better if it is intelligence-led, based on information that comes from the community and is gathered by community police officers and others working in the community, so that it is effective. I pay tribute to the Prime Minister—I do not always do that, as the Policing Minister will know—for being brave on this issue when she was Home Secretary. She made clear that stop-and-search was not the tool that the police force should use, because there was so much discrimination coming from it and so much ill feeling, given the much higher proportion of black people being stopped and searched. As we have this debate, we should remember Stephen Lawrence and be very careful before we reach for the stop-and-search tool as some sort of solution.

New technologies are being used that this House has not yet turned its attention to. At the moment, facial recognition techniques are not regulated, and this House has not debated the civil liberty issues around them. I am worried about that, because in the United States, where they have been used, there has been bias against black and ethnic minority communities in the way that those technologies appear to work. If we are going to update our understanding of racism in policing, we need to ensure that we apply the lessons of the past to the technologies of the future, so that they are properly regulated and not discriminatory.

In my intervention on the hon. Member for Nottingham North, I mentioned the real concern that at senior ranks—superintendent and above—there appears to be a disproportionate number of black and ethnic minority police officers being disciplined. That is a worry, because there seems to be no reasonable explanation other than attempts by other officers to get in the way of those officers’ careers. That is pernicious. I have not done a full study—that would require a lot of evidence, because it is such a serious allegation—but it needs to be looked at.

I hope the Minister can assure us that his Department and the police are taking those issues seriously, because if we do not ensure that black male and female officers are treated fairly and perceived to be treated fairly, we will not deal with this. We will not get the recruitment and retention. We will not get enough representation at a senior level, which is fundamentally the only way to solve this issue, and we will not give all our communities trust and confidence in their police force.

There has been progress, but I worry that it has stalled, and as it reflects wider society, it may even have gone backwards. We all know about and have debated at length in this Chamber in recent weeks and months the many challenges facing our country, our society and our police forces, but this issue has to come back on to the agenda, because it has slipped down, and it is our duty to ensure that it gets back up there. We must ensure that senior police officers, chief constables, the Met Commissioner and all those whose day-to-day responsibility this is understand and hear a message from this House loud and clear, cross-party, that we want them to take this even more seriously than they have in the past, that progress is too slow and that we want them to go further and faster.

When we talk to black and ethnic minority communities about the police, they often say that they are over-policing and under-protected—I am not the first to use that phrase. We cannot accept that combination. We cannot allow a group in our population to feel that they are targeted and yet not protected. Figures show that they are often more likely to be the victims of crime. I go back to the appalling knife crime we are seeing, particularly in the capital. It is black and ethnic minority young people—often, young men—who are most likely to be the victims, and they therefore deserve more protection and more attention in a very sensitive way.

I hope that, as a result of this debate, the House will come together and send a clear signal to Ministers and to police authorities across the country.

9.10 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) for securing this important Back-Bench debate. It is important to start by paying homage to Baroness Lawrence and Dr Neville Lawrence for their tireless campaigning to bring the murderers of Stephen, their beloved son, to justice.

Since the publication of the Macpherson report, some advances have been made on its recommendations. Unfortunately, however, the data and lived experience of the BAME community suggest that the question of institutional and structural bias, which was the focus of the Lawrence inquiry, is still very much the question for us today. I will be using my speech to address the
increasing problem of the disproportionality of stop-searches. I am advocating recommendation 61 of the Macpherson report on the provision of a record of all stops and stop-searches.

I do welcome the reduction in the number of stop-searches and the attempts to make their use more intelligence-led, but—and this is a big but—that has not raised difficult questions about just how far law enforcement has really come since the Lawrence inquiry. In summary, while total numbers of stop-searches have fallen, disproportionality in the stop-and-search rate has dramatically increased when it comes to black people. They are more likely to be arrested as a result of stop-and-search, yet the find rate of stolen or prohibited items is similar for all ethnic groups. The work of StopWatch has been invaluable in collecting the data to show this.

According to “Police powers and procedures, England and Wales” statistics, at the time of the Lawrence inquiry, black people were stop-searched at between three and four times the rate of white people. However, in 2016-17, it was almost eight times the rate. For Asian people and those who self-identify as mixed, the rate was twice what it was for white people. While stop-searches were at relatively modest levels among the white population in the past, their experience of it on average has plummeted. The scale of the disproportionality experienced by BAME communities indicates that the enduring use of stop-and-search powers is more heavily concentrated on black and minority ethnic groups. Many Members in the House today have reiterated what I have said.

In London, unfortunately, the variations across boroughs point to discrimination. While the overall rates of stop-and-search are highest in the more deprived boroughs, disproportionality is highest in the relatively wealthy and affluent boroughs similar to Richmond. People are subjected to punitive actions, and I say “punitive” in a very passionate way, because I represent Edmonton. Unfortunately, in Edmonton—the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) spoke about the loss of life—it is almost inconceivable how young families are trying to bring themselves together when one of their own children is taken in such a traumatic way.

We need to take this seriously. Yes, we need to use intelligence when we are stopping and searching anybody, but we cannot disproportionately target one community when that same community is more likely to be caught up in some kind of violent act. We need to find a way to support the community and to train the police so that we can work together, because one life is too many, and we should not be having the figures we have at the moment.

Black people have been singled out for suspicion, and the pattern is consistent with ethnic profiling. People from black and other minority ethnic groups tend to live in areas of high deprivation, in relatively large numbers, because of a variety of socioeconomic factors. Concentrating stop-and-search in boroughs with high levels of deprivation fuels disproportionality and entrenches stop-searches and police intervention. This is the lived experience for many communities, especially BAME communities. That high rate of stop-searches reflects proactive policing that often strays into over-policing in those areas, whereas more affluent areas simply experience a more reactive approach from the police. Over-policing and the effects of disproportionality mean that young black people often run out of police cautions or warnings much faster than their white peers in more affluent areas, which results in the police resorting to arrests for petty infringements.

The Government have not acknowledged that disproportionality, which gives rise to the concern that some are in denial. Indeed, the concerted efforts of some to deny that such bias exists, in the face of overwhelming statistical evidence, make me worry that perhaps we are regressing rather than continuing to move on with the recommendations made in the Macpherson report and in the 2009 Select Committee on Home Affairs report on progress made.

One key way in which that regression may already be happening is through the use of body-worn cameras. Yes, their use can be extremely helpful in holding to account all parties involved in an incident, and especially in keeping a record of a police intervention. However, their use has also precipitated a change in police procedure. Before their introduction, the person stopped was given a copy of the record of the stop-search and, most importantly, the reason why the power had been used. Now, however, officers can simply provide a receipt if the record is made electronically or via their radio. That practice disempowers the person stopped and strips them of the reason for their interaction with law enforcement. This poor practice must be eliminated.

I put it to the Home Secretary and the Minister that, given the evidence, it is time for primary legislation. The Home Secretary’s predecessor, now the Prime Minister, said in 2014 that if ratios did not improve considerably, “the Government will return with primary legislation to make those things happen, because nobody wins when stop-and-search is misapplied.”—[Official Report, 30 April 2014; Vol. 579, c. 833.] The disproportionality of stop-searches has shot up and stop-to-arrest has not improved. I say to the Government that it is now time for primary legislation urgently to address this palpable racial injustice.

9.18 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I start by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) for securing this debate on this important anniversary.

No family should ever have to go through what the Lawrence family went through, by which I mean not just the racist murder of their son but the way in which the police responded—or failed to respond properly for many years—to the crime. I am privileged to work alongside Baroness Lawrence on the Joint Committee on Human Rights. To prepare for today’s debate, I read the evidence she gave earlier this month to the Home Affairs Committee inquiry. Other Members have referred to it already, but I believe that the things she had to say should be very important takeaways for us all and that they are matters on which the Minister should consider taking action.

Baroness Lawrence said that if she were writing the report today, the thing she would focus on most is education, and the second would be the importance of training the police to do their job properly. She said that unless we start educating our young people to live their best lives, things will not improve. During the course of the evidence session, the right hon. Member for Normanton,
Ponflefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the Chair of the Committee, raised a point about education, saying that
“the figures show that black graduates are significantly less likely to achieve firsts or 2:1s than white graduates, even when you take account of prior attainment and A-levels and so on, and also are more likely to drop out. That sounds like a pretty big problem for universities.” That is a problem universities need to address. If one reads Baroness Lawrence’s evidence carefully, that was the sort of thing she was getting at.

Baroness Lawrence highlighted the police’s lack of empathy at the time the crime was first being investigated—I use the term loosely, because the initial investigation was woeful. She said:
“We had just lost our son. When they came to the house, which was quite regularly, they were not interested in giving us information about how the investigation was happening. That was what we wanted to know, but it was just about the information that we were giving them.” She also said:
“We were treated as criminals.” There was an assumption that because Stephen was a black boy he must have been a criminal. Empathy and respect for human dignity should be at the heart of all police work, but it was not in the case of Stephen Lawrence, at least not until much later in the day and then only in the case of certain individual police officers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) made the point during the Home Affairs Committee evidence session that although the term “institutional racism” has been very helpful in making us as a society understand what went wrong in the Lawrence case, it should not be used to absolve individuals from their culpability of what went wrong. That includes individuals within the police force, as well as those who originally perpetrated the crime.

It is worth pausing to note that this was a racist crime. There seems to have been language surrounding it that fits with the language of the far right. Let there be no doubt: the far right is on the rise again in the United Kingdom, and we must very much guard against that.

I wish most strongly to pay tribute to Baroness Lawrence and Neville Lawrence for their dignity and their tenacity in their fight for justice. Tribute should also be paid to the 1997 Labour Government, who had the gumption to institute the inquiry. Often now, when we are looking at public inquiries, for example the inquiry into the Grenfell fire, we look to the broad terms of reference of the Macpherson inquiry as guidance on what is ideal.

I want to say a little about the response in Scotland to the issues that came out of the Macpherson inquiry. Shortly after the report was published, the then Scottish Executive were quick to create an action plan to take forward the relevant Macpherson recommendations in Scotland. Even now, the Scottish Government recognise that it is their responsibility to ensure that what happened to Stephen Lawrence and his family could never happen in Scotland. We must not ever be complacent about that, or assume that any Government or society has a monopoly on doing the right thing. Institutional racism can be found across our society, as can individual instances of racism.

The Scottish Government have taken on board lessons in relation to the importance of supporting the victims of crime and of fighting knife crime, which is such a scourge in our society across these islands. Over the past 20 years, and particularly the past 10 years, the Scottish Government have been at the forefront of putting the rights of victims and vulnerable witnesses at the heart of the criminal justice system. They continue to do so. The new victims taskforce has been set up, chaired by the Scottish Justice Secretary, to improve victims’ experience of the justice system.

The Scottish Government have also taken action to address hate crime. I am pleased to say that racially motivated crime in Scotland has, according to the statistics, decreased by 29% since 2011-12. In June 2017, the Scottish Government published an ambitious programme of work to tackle hate crime and build community cohesion across Scotland, and they have worked with Police Scotland to develop the data that they hold on hate crime, with a report due to be published later this year.

The Scottish Government have also worked to ensure that education plays its part in advancing equality and tackling discrimination and hate crime. Clearly, the importance of education was something that Baroness Lawrence highlighted in her evidence to the Home Affairs Committee. On 15 November 2017, a national approach to anti-bullying for Scotland’s children and young people was published. All schools are expected to develop and implement an anti-bullying policy, in line with the “Respect for All” policy, which should be reviewed and updated regularly.

At present, England and Wales, and particularly this city of London, face an enormous problem with knife crime. There have been many tragic instances of murder across this great city of London in the last year. It is well known—we have had many debates about this in the Chamber recently—that in the past, Scotland faced a terrible problem with knife crime, and that the public health approach to tackling violence advocated by the World Health Organisation, which has been adopted in Scotland, has worked greatly to reduce the incidence of knife crime in Scotland. I am absolutely delighted that so many representatives of this city—from the Met police to the Mayor to members of the British House of Commons—have been up to Scotland to look at the public health approach to tackling violence. It really has brought amazing results in Scotland, and it is clearly effective when we look at the fact that violent crime in Scotland has decreased by 49% over the last decade.

I would not wish to be thought to be at all complacent about the position in Scotland. There are things that we could do better, and we must all work to do better. However, today’s debate is specifically about following up on the recommendations of the Macpherson report, and it is clear that there is concern throughout the Chamber that perhaps the extent to which the recommendations have been implemented has not been adequately measured, so I would like to know what the Minister is going to do about that. Will he also take a leaf out of the Scottish Government’s book in dealing with the victims of crime and tackling knife crime? Finally, will he tell us what the Government are doing to make sure that the rise of the far right across the United Kingdom does not mean a return to the sort of ghastly crime that took the young Stephen Lawrence’s life?
People forget—or perhaps they were not in the House then—that the death of Stephen Lawrence was one of a series of deaths of young black men in south-east London at that time. This was partly related—to the fact that the British National party had its headquarters in Bexley. In 1991, Rolan Adams was stabbed to death by 12 thugs. Only one of them was ever convicted. In 1992, a 16-year-old, Rohit Duggal, was also killed as a consequence of a racist attack. In the months after Stephen’s death, 19 people were injured in a brawl outside the local BNP headquarters.

At that point, Stephen Lawrence’s death made no impact in the wider society. I give the Daily Mail genuine credit, because it took Paul Dacre’s extraordinary front page to make it a subject that the wider society took up. In the black community, however, there was tremendous feeling about it from the beginning, because we knew it was part of a series of deaths of young black men.

Stephen Lawrence died in 1993, and later that year I was the first person in the House of Commons to make a speech about his death. I said:

“The black men and women who came to this country in the 1950s and 1960s went through difficult times and had to work hard to keep themselves and their families together. They always believed…that, for their children, times would be better…Therefore, the recent spate of killings of young black people “and the killing of Stephen Lawrence in particular is distinctly cruel. Black young people are being killed “in a way that makes it look as if society is throwing a community’s hopes back in its face.”—[Official Report, 21 May 1993; Vol. 225, c. 541.]

That was the feeling in the black community at the time. It did not get coverage in the national papers until the Daily Mail took it up, and it was not an issue in this House, but people felt very strongly about it.

For several years, Doreen and Neville Lawrence campaigned on the issues, and it was hard going, because there was little interest. They went to court, and they lost. They organised demonstrations and they lobbied their local MPs. They never gave up. The thing I remember most vividly about the aftermath of the death of Stephen Lawrence is taking Doreen to see my colleague Jack Straw, then Member for Blackburn and shadow Home Secretary. It was the last thing that Doreen could think of to do. We went with other Members of colour, including the then Members for Tottenham and for Brent, South.

I remember talking to Jack Straw before the meeting, and he was actually more interested in issues of diversity than was common at the time. I hope he will not mind my saying that he was a little sceptical about the Stephen Lawrence case, because the Met police at the time were really sceptical. I went into that meeting with my colleagues and Doreen, and she turned Jack Straw around with her passion, her commitment to justice for her son and her fixity of purpose. Jack Straw started that meeting a little sceptical and he came out committed to a public inquiry. No sooner had Labour been elected in 1997 than he delivered on his promise. He gave Doreen her inquiry.

When the inquiry was set up, it was to be led by Judge Macpherson, and some of us asked, “Who is this establishment figure? What kind of report are we going to get?” In fact, it was an amazing report that transfigured the debate. If it has not been implemented in the way that I would have liked, that is no criticism of Judge Macpherson. It shows that sometimes an establishment figure leading an inquiry can have rather good results.

The extraordinary thing is that the Labour Government gave Doreen her inquiry, and it was an important and well thought-out inquiry. The sad thing has been the lack of progress since the Macpherson inquiry. Chief Constable Jon Boutcher is the lead on race and religion for the National Police Chiefs’ Council, and he has said:

“My challenge to policing is that the pace of change is too slow, since Macpherson. In my view it could have been faster. I think it’s about commitment at a senior leadership level. I don’t accept that everything has been done…There have been the words, but not the actions. We need to make sure we have words and actions.”

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech. Does she agree that there are still problems in the Metropolitan police force, and that it is probably accurate to say that more work needs to be done to ensure that any form of institutional racism is eradicated from the Met?

Ms Abbott: I agree that there is more work to be done. Chief Constable Jon Boutcher also said that race was continually at the heart of the biggest issues facing policing. He spoke about the disproportional over-targeting of black people for stop-and-search purposes which was referred to by my hon. Friend. I remember the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor), about knife crime, about female genital mutilation, about honour-based violence, about modern slavery and about terrorism. He said:

“Race is at the core of so much, we should always have race as a priority regarding representation and community confidence. Race has not continued to be the priority that it should have over the last 25 years.”

That was said by a chief constable, not by some dangerous black radical.

There has been progress, and the narrative is different now. Phrases such as “institutional racism” can be used, and people understand what they mean. The phrase “institutional racism” does not imply that every single individual in an individual in an institution is racist; it means that there are ways in which a certain institution works. However, there has not been enough progress. People forget that after Macpherson, police chiefs from the 43 forces in England and Wales agreed on a Government target: there must be the same proportion of black officers in their ranks as in the community that they served. They were given a decade in which to achieve that, but none of them ever did so.

My hon. Friends have identified a number of issues that arise from any consideration of Macpherson, such as the use of the gangs matrix, in which young black men are disproportionately racially profiled, and the
use of stop and search. Labour Members believe in evidence-based stop and search, but its random use has done more to exacerbate bad relationships between the police and the community than anything else. We continue to insist that evidence-based stop and search is one thing, but random stop and search is another. It is all too easy for politicians so say, in the face of a crime wave, “Let us have more stop and search”, but we must insist on its being evidence-based. My hon. Friends have spoken about the importance of recruiting more policemen of colour, the issue being that members of police forces should look like the communities that they serve. There is also the long-standing issue of the promotion possibilities for black policemen.

Macpherson was probably one of the most important events in my lifetime in the context of the debate about race. It has changed the way in which we talk about race, particularly in relation to policing. It is a tribute to Doreen Lawrence for her tenacity, her courage and her persistence that we ever had a Macpherson inquiry. However, there is more to do. We cannot be complacent. Because race is at the heart of many of the issues involved in policing and community safety, we need to look again at those recommendations and proceed with their implementation.

The Macpherson inquiry threw down a gauntlet to society about race. We must pick up that gauntlet, and fulfil the promise of that important inquiry.

9.39 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): The hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) speaks with a directness and passion that I have grown to respect, and I congratulate him, and the Backbench Business Committee, on securing the time for this debate.

The debate connects us on a human level with the night of 22 April 1993 and a young black boy, 18 years old, standing at a bus stop in south-east London dreaming of being an architect murdered, apparently for the colour of his skin, with no provocation at all. It connects us with the story of an extraordinary family, Baroness and Dr Lawrence, and their journey from that point over so many years to pursue the truth, to pursue accountability and to pursue justice, not just for Stephen but for all victims of racism, and the extraordinary journey from 1993 to January 2012 when Gary Dobson and David Norris were finally tried and found guilty of the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence.

I join all Members of Parliament who have spoken and expressed their admiration for the family, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) and the hon. Members for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) and for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) and of course the right hon. Members for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) and for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott). I thank the right hon. Lady for sharing with us this evening, because clearly she was personally directly and very closely involved with this, and her speech was incredibly valuable for me, not least in reminding me that Stephen Lawrence’s murder needs to be put in the context of what else was going on at that time in London. This has been an excellent debate.

The Chairman of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), is no longer in her place, but I congratulate her and the rest of the Committee on bucking us up on this issue, because the timing could not be better to put the Government again under scrutiny and to make them accountable for delivery and us as a Parliament for the progress we make. Underlying this is the question of what kind of society we are and want to be, and the progress we are making towards that goal. As many Members have pointed out, the circumstances keep changing; the challenges evolve and some of the circumstances we are facing now, whether it be the emergence of the far-right or the terrible cycle of serious violence that we are trying to manage at the moment, mean that this situation and set of challenges are not going away, and we need to redouble our commitment to bear down on them.

The Chairman of the Select Committee talked about the legacy of Stephen, as did many others, and of course part of that legacy is the work of the Stephen Lawrence Trust. I hope that the inaugural Stephen Lawrence day on 22 April will be a wonderful success, and certainly my Department and I personally will do everything we can to make sure not least that the police engage in the most constructive and positive way with that day. The theme not just of Dr Lawrence but also encouraging and supporting young people in the achievement of their dreams and living their best lives—as the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) said, reminding us of the language of Baroness Lawrence—presents an important opportunity, and we must seize it and do that day proper justice.

As Stephen’s dad said, arguably Stephen’s most important legacy is the inquiry and the Macpherson report. We are used in this place to the power of words, but in a 350-page report two words have stood the test of time: the bombshell judgment of the Metropolitan police as “institutionally racist” was seismic in its impact not just on the police but on the establishment as a whole, because, as many have pointed out, of course underlying this story is a systemic failure to protect a young man and support a family and all the issues that raised.

We know from our experience in this place that reports come and go and few touch the sides of history, but the Macpherson report does. The fact that a Minister is standing at the Dispatch Box being held to account for ongoing delivery against those recommendations 20 years later tells its own story about the importance of this report. I can confidently predict that the House will revisit this, not just in the immediate term because of the Home Affairs Committee but because the underlying issues are so important and systemic and because, as the hon. Member for Battersea rightly said, we do not live in a post-racial society. We must continue to revisit this and hold ourselves to account on this issue.

I am delighted to be at the Dispatch Box talking about this now. As most speakers have said, there are things to feel positive about. Looking through the recommendations this morning, I could see that 68 of the 70 had been implemented either in part or in full, but I look forward to the process of scrutiny by the Home Affairs Committee. The Home Office will certainly make on the ongoing transparency surrounding the implementation of the recommendations.

As I am sure most Members will acknowledge, implementing recommendations in part or in full is one thing, but their having an effect is a different matter.
That involves a different set of judgments. I believe that a lot has changed in police attitudes and processes, and I was encouraged to hear others speak of this as well, not least the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton, who talked about tragic murder investigations in his constituency and about family liaison officers. My perspective on FLOs is as the Minister with responsibility for Grenfell victims. If I look back on the past difficult, dark and turbulent 18 months, and I look at the things that have gone right, I see the network of FLOs and support that they have given to bereaved families in the most traumatic circumstances. They have done an absolutely marvellous job in the most difficult circumstances.

When I look at our approach to hate crime, I also see an increased sense of responsibility and professionalism in the police in terms of identifying hate crime and racially aggravated crime. I believe that I can see progress there as well. So there is much to be positive about, but we must be very candid in recognising that there is so much more that needs to be done, not least to build confidence—a word used a lot by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) tonight—and trust in our criminal justice system. I actually genuinely believe that it is colour blind, but there are too many people in this country who do not. That is at the heart of this challenge.

This Government have not taken their eye off the ball on race. I take pride that, under this Prime Minister, we are, I think, the first Government in the world to conduct a race disparity audit. This will provide an invaluable tool for this process in the form of transparency, data and evidence that is open to scrutiny, to comparison and to measurement of progress. In my experience, it is that uncomfortable light that gets institutions moving. The race disparity audit is incredibly important, and one of the most uncomfortable lights that it throws is on the police.

We have heard many contributions to the debate about stop and search, not least from the hon. Member for Edmonton. She and other Opposition Members have a tremendous understanding of and sensitivity to this issue. I was delighted to hear praise for the Prime Minister's personal leadership on what has arguably been the biggest reform of stop and search in its history. That is at the heart of this challenge.

This Government have not taken their eye off the ball on race. I take pride that, under this Prime Minister, we are, I think, the first Government in the world to conduct a race disparity audit. This will provide an invaluable tool for this process in the form of transparency, data and evidence that is open to scrutiny, to comparison and to measurement of progress. In my experience, it is that uncomfortable light that gets institutions moving. The race disparity audit is incredibly important, and one of the most uncomfortable lights that it throws is on the police.

Another area in which I take pride is the progress we have made on increasing the accountability of the police. Again, without that accountability it is hard to make progress. The introduction of police and crime commissioners is a positive. The increased transparency on the performance of the police is a positive. The reform of the police complaints system is a positive. The enhanced role of the College of Policing in providing support and training is a positive. I congratulate the Police Superintendents Association on its leadership in providing mentoring services to several hundred police officers from BME communities across the country to help them with the issue of progression.

Let me say something about the issue that most Members spoke to—diversity. For me, diversity in policing matters enormously; because it is not just about social equality and equality of opportunity, and Peelian principle 7 of the police needing to represent and reflect their communities; it is also about the competition for talent and making sure that our police service has the ability to recruit the best, because policing has changed and we need to be sure that our police service recruits from the widest possible pool of talent. The point I would make to the shadow Home Secretary and those who say we have not made enough progress is that they are absolutely right: we are nowhere near where we need to be on diversity in policing. The right hon. Lady rightly references Bedfordshire police. What is interesting about Bedfordshire police, the Met and the West Midlands and Manchester police is that when we look at where positive action is deployed, within the law, and with the right leadership, resources and plan, the needle moves—it is extraordinary, and this is not rocket science. Bedfordshire has doubled the participation of BME officers in that force in a short number of years—it can be done.

Some will argue that we need to go further, beyond positive action to positive discrimination, and change the law. The Government are not in that place at the moment, because the leadership in the police are convincing us that they are serious about this. For the first time we have a national diversity strategy that all chiefs have signed up to. That is important because of the point that Jon Boutcher was making about the need for leadership from the top. The police is a compliance culture; the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) talked about culture and that comes from the top in policing. The fact that every police chief has signed up to this strategy gives me some encouragement. My role and that of the Home Secretary is to hold them to account on delivery, and we have made it clear, through the various roundtables at which we have sat down with them, that if we do not see quicker delivery on this, we may have to rethink our strategy. This is that important to the building and maintenance of trust in our policing, particularly in those communities where that trust is lower than the national average—the BME communities.

I wish to make one other point before we hear again from the hon. Member for Nottingham North. This is not just about recruitment, retention and progression; there is also something that needs to be addressed in respect of the cases of discrimination against police officers. Next week, I am meeting PC Nadeem Saddique, a firearms officer who waited 16 years for justice in terms of his claims about racist abuse by fellow officers in Cleveland police. That is absolutely unacceptable to me, so there is something also about the combating of discrimination within police forces and the lack of consequence for those found guilty of it that concerns me.

In summary, the Macpherson report was a watershed report. It was absolutely seismic in its impact. I congratulate Jack Straw, the then Home Secretary, on his initiative and leadership at the time; this was absolutely the right decision and it was one of the biggest he took as Home Secretary, as he said. It is the responsibility of successive Governments, of whatever colour, to constantly revisit
not just the implementation of the recommendations, important as that is, but their impact and effect, because at the heart of this is a debate about the tolerance and inclusiveness of our society, and the key institutions that we depend on for our safety and protection. They failed Stephen Lawrence. They failed the Lawrence family. There are still too many instances of failure around the system. We have not made as much progress as we need to. We need to be constantly vigilant and to redouble our commitment, as the hon. Member for Nottingham North suggested. With that commitment on behalf of the Government, I hand it back to him.

9.54 pm

Alex Norris: To quickly sum up, I thank the Backbench Business Committee for its support in securing this debate and the Home Affairs Committee for its support in its execution, and also their Chairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). Both have given me extraordinary guidance throughout my time here, but especially for this debate.

I would also like to put on record—I am not sure whether it is in order for me to do so, Mr Speaker, but sometimes it is better to ask for forgiveness than permission—my thanks to the Clerks of both Committees, especially the Home Affairs Committee. They are an outstanding bunch of people and professionals, and I really appreciated their support.

I also thank the Government for finding time for this debate. I wondered whether it would get in in a timely manner, but I take the fact that it did as a sign of good faith. It would have been easy for that not to have happened, so I appreciate that too.

I particularly thank colleagues for their contributions, including my hon. Friends the Members for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) and for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) and, from other parts of the House, the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) and the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross). The hon. Gentleman said in the Committee, and again today, that he felt that he grew up with this case. He is just a year older than me, although perhaps no one could tell by looking at him—I think there is something in the highlands and islands fresh air that gives him eternal youth. I also feel that I grew up with this case, but I do not want to grow old with it. I hope that long before then we will show that we have delivered.

I was interested to hear from the SNP Front Bench about what has worked in Scotland and to hear a positive plug for a public health approach to knife crime. We cannot say that loudly enough, I strongly believe that we need to build a rock-solid consensus around that.

From our Front Bench, we also heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott). Her leadership on this and similar issues, not just over the last 20 years but over many years preceding that, is something that I look up to and that we cannot applaud enough. It was eerie to hear her words from two decades ago, because I am afraid they resonate down the years, which is why it is still important that we talk about this today. During the debate I was sent a message from someone basically saying, “What a stupid topic to talk about. Why don’t you focus on something more important?” Modern technology is unique in allowing people to feel inadequate in real time about how they are doing their job. However, as we heard from the words of my right hon. Friend from the Front Bench, as well as many others, this is a case that echoes down the years. If we continually fail to learn the lessons, we will continually seem to get these tragedies. That is why it is important that we talk about this issue today, and I make absolutely no apology for it.

To conclude, I was pleased to hear from the Minister for Policing about the figure of 68 out of 70. He very much invited the scrutiny of the Committee, and that is what he will get. We will get into that detail and report, and I would be interested to hear the response once we have, because I am not quite sure how we would know that the figure was 68 out of 70. I would be grateful if that could be clarified, because certainly in three weeks of trying I have yet to find a marshalled list of progress made, so it would be wonderful if that could be shared.

This has been an exceptionally high-quality debate, and I appreciate the contributions of all hon. Members. It has shown us at our very best.

Question put and agreed to. Resolved.

That this House notes the twentieth anniversary of the publication of the Macpherson Report on the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry on 24 February 2019; and calls on the Government and all in public life to renew their commitment to fulfilling the recommendations of the Macpherson Report.

Business without Debate

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, I propose to take motions 4 to 11 inclusive together.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (PESTICIDES)

That the draft Plant Protection Products (Miscellaneous Amendments) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 13 December 2018, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (AGRICULTURE)

That the draft Pesticides (Maximum Residue Levels) (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 13 December 2018, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (MERCHANT SHIPPING)

That the draft Merchant Shipping (Marine Equipment) (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 16 January, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES)

That the draft Financial Regulators’ Powers (Technical Standards etc.) and Markets in Financial Instruments (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 29 January, be approved.
Exiting the European Union

That the draft European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 (Consequential Modifications and Repeals and Revocations) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 29 January, be approved.—(Iain Stewart.)

Question agreed to.

Committee on Standards

Ordered,
That Liz Twist be added to the Committee on Standards.—(Iain Stewart.)

Committee of Privileges

Ordered,
That Sir Kevin Barron be discharged from the Committee of Privileges and Liz Twist be added.—(Iain Stewart.)

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, I propose to take motions 12, 13 and 14 together.

Environmental Audit Committee

Ordered,
That Joan Ryan be discharged from the Environmental Audit Committee and Alex Cunningham be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)

Human Rights (Joint Committee)

Ordered,
That Alex Burghart be discharged from the Joint Committee on Human Rights and Scott Mann be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

Ordered,
That Sandy Martin be discharged from the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee and Eleanor Smith be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)

Instrumental Music Tuition

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Iain Stewart.)

9.59 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): When I informed constituents that I had this debate tonight, I said that it could start before 10 o’clock. I see that we have an extra 40 seconds for tonight’s Adjournment debate, which I will make sure that I use to their full effect.

It is a pleasure to lead tonight’s debate on the importance of instrumental music tuition for young people. I should say from the outset that I have no real link to this subject, having absolutely zero musical talent. At school, I went through various different instruments to try to find the one that I could adopt to play, but all to no avail. In the end, the only instrument that I was entrusted with was the triangle and, if I do say so, I think I am a pretty good triangle player, but that is another story.

Despite my own lack of ability, it is clear that, as MP for Moray, I represent an area rich in musical talent. In my time as a councillor, an MSP and now an MP, one of the most enjoyable invitations that I receive is to the concerts of the Moray Schools Youth Orchestra and Training Orchestra.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I warmly congratulate the hon. Gentleman on leading this debate on a very important issue. I am sure that he agrees that nobody should ever be priced out of music tuition, which is absolutely vital. Will he also join me in congratulating many brass bands, including Blaena von band in my constituency, that also do so much to engage young people in music?

Douglas Ross: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I will come on to the issues about fees and potentially prohibiting people from enjoying music to its full effect. The brass band in his constituency and those in constituencies across the country do great work, engaging young people and people of all ages in music.

I was just saying that the most enjoyable invitations that I receive are to the concerts of the Moray Schools Youth Orchestra and Training Orchestra. It is clear that the hard work and dedication of all the pupils and the instructors always leaves the audiences calling for more. In particular, the summer concert is the culmination of a week of training and guidance by the instructors and Nigel Boddice MBE, with the concerts at the end of the week always proving extremely popular. It is clear how much the young people develop over that week, and how the skills they learn will stay with them for a lifetime.

I applied for this evening’s debate after the SNP-led Moray Council proposed increasing the cost of music tuition in Moray by a staggering 85%. As this is both a devolved issue in terms of council funding and a local council matter, I had opponents saying that I should not get involved. However, as a Member of Parliament, I think my first duty is as a representative, and when a huge number of parents, constituents and pupils contacted me to protest against these charges, I felt that I had to show my support in some way.
Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and I congratulate him on bringing this matter forward. Does he not agree that funding cuts to schools have meant that many schools have had to cut their additional programmes, and that music very often is the first to go? More Government emphasis and dedicated funding to schools will ensure that people whose parents cannot afford to pay for private lessons have at least an avenue to see children introduced to the wonderful world of music. I know some people in my constituency who had an opportunity at school to learn music, and who are now talented people who can earn an extra income. Those are the possibilities that exist for those who have the opportunity.

Douglas Ross: I am very grateful for that intervention by the hon. Gentleman who is an assiduous participant in these Adjournment debates. He raises two or three issues that I am going to come on to in the remainder of my speech about ensuring that we do not price people out of music. I am talking about not just the musical talent that people develop as they go through music instruction, but the benefits to the wider community that are sometimes forgotten. I will expand further on those points later in my speech.

As bitter a blow as the announcement of the fee increases was, the knock-on effect was just as significant. Our valued, talented and hugely respected head of music instruction service, John Mustard, resigned from his position after 30 years of dedicated and loyal service. John specifically blamed the increase in charging for his decision. He said:

"The reason is simple, I cannot agree with the decision by the council to raise the cost of music lessons by 85% to what will be the highest level in Scotland. In a low wage economy such as Moray this will have the effect of depriving many young people of a valuable skill and pleasure for life. I regret this deeply but I cannot be part of a decision that will do so much damage to a service I have built up to national acclaim over the last 30 years."

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Can the hon. Gentleman tell us whether the Conservative group on Moray Council have put forward alternative proposals for the budget given that it abandoned the administration last year? If they had put forward alternative proposals, they might have avoided these rises.

Douglas Ross: The hon. Gentleman is perhaps not aware—only reading the SNP’s spin—that the reason that the Scottish Conservatives left the administration on Moray Council was because the SNP councillors, the independent councillors and all the other councillors would not countenance a proposal to reduce the senior management level at Moray Council in order to save hundreds of thousands of pounds to protect the services that we are speaking about today. He asked whether the Conservatives put forward an alternative proposal; yes, they did. They opposed the 85% increase in fees, but the SNP said, “No, it has to go ahead.” As I will mention in a moment, the SNP has now gone back on that decision. After ignoring the Scottish Conservative councillors at the budget meeting in January, the SNP councillors are now following some of the advice we gave them. I just hope that they go a bit further at the full budget meeting on Wednesday.

It should not have come to this. John and his team have nurtured so many talented individuals in Moray who have gone on to perform across the world.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that John and many of the teachers and tutors who provide music education in schools across the United Kingdom go above and beyond, often giving up their spare time to put on the fantastic efforts that many of us go to see in our constituencies?

Douglas Ross: My hon. Friend is a passionate advocate for her area, and what she experiences in Angus is exactly what we have experienced in Moray. People like John go above and beyond their remit in the education department to do so much more.

I want to say a huge thank you to John for everything he has done for music in Moray. Without him, I am sure that the service would not have reached the popularity it has or gained the respect that it rightly receives. I asked Nigel Boddice for his thoughts on John’s resignation, and he summed it up perfectly by saying:

“The loss of John Mustard due to the increase of fees feels like a bereavement to me personally and I’m sure to the community at large. 30 years of talent, skill, musicianship of the highest possible order has been invested in your youth. Moray will now become a cultural desert I fear. With John’s departure music has lost out, but worse, so has the youth of tomorrow and the community.”

To follow on from the intervention of the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), I can confirm that the SNP-led administration have now scaled back their proposed fee increase to 20%, but this will still have a damaging effect. When fees were increased by 20% a couple of years ago, the service saw a 15% drop-out rate. For a service that reaches more than 800 young people in Moray, that is a concerning statistic. I also know that about a dozen pupils withdrew from the service all together in the weeks since the 85% increase was announced—their joy and passion for music cut short because of a short-sighted cut.

In the time remaining, I will discuss why the service is so important in Moray, Scotland and across the UK.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It may not come as a surprise that the SNP-led South Ayrshire Council has also increased the cost of music tuition, which has excluded some people. Although it has made provision for the less well-off, it has still put people out of pocket. At a time when creative subjects such as music have never been more important to individuals or to the economy, is the question not simply: why do we charge at all for musical instrument tuition lessons throughout schools in the UK? Should we not bring an end to charges throughout the United Kingdom? It is not necessary and we could give these people a great opportunity in music.

Douglas Ross: My hon. Friend leads me on to a recent report of the Scottish Parliament’s Education and Skills Committee, which looked at that point and several others. Importantly, the report examined the benefits of music education. Students contributing to the report pointed out the transferable skills that learning to play an instrument can build, such as dexterity, creative problem-solving and focus.

In the report Alastair Orr, an instrumental music teacher, mentioned the UCL Institute of Research and a 2015 report which highlighted that children receiving music tuition show heightened literacy, numeracy and social skills. He said:
“Any investment in instrumental and vocal education by local and national governments is more than returned by the contribution of young people to the cultural, educational and social fabric of our country.”

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): My hon. Friend mentions my constituent Alastair Orr. I hope that he will join me in paying tribute to Alastair Orr and many others throughout Scotland who have led an amazing campaign in support of music tuition. Does my hon. Friend agree with Alastair Orr that the current situation in Scotland is a shambolic lottery? In Inverclyde, it costs £117 a year for music instrument tuition, whereas it costs £524 in Clackmannanshire and £268 in Stirling. It is a shambolic lottery, is it not?

Douglas Ross: I agree with my hon. Friend. I pay tribute to Alastair Orr. Like many people, Alastair contacted me ahead of this debate keen to input his undoubted wisdom on this subject. The postcode lottery element is significant. I find it strange and disappointing that SNP Ministers in the Scottish Parliament will criticise local councils such as Midlothian for their plans because they are Labour-led but will not criticise SNP-led Moray Council for similar plans. We have to ensure that there is not a postcode lottery and that there are opportunities for our young people across Scotland and across the UK to access music tuition.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Perhaps it might help the debate if we keep it to the benefits of music tuition itself. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the cultural benefits. For communities such as mine in Orkney and Shetland, the availability of tuition in schools has been enormously important in the maintenance and growing of traditional music that is indigenous to our island communities. Should that not be given greater value, be it by councils or government at any level?

Douglas Ross: I respect what the right hon. Gentleman has said. In my previous role as a Member of the Scottish Parliament, I represented those islands as part of the wider highlands and islands region. There is undoubted talent within the islands, and that has spread further now. Musicians from Orkney and from Shetland are going on to receive national acclaim, and that shows how important such traditional music is.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again—he is most gracious. He referred to culture earlier. In Northern Ireland we have a tremendous band culture that probably comes off the back of the Royal Black preceptory and the apprentice boys. Many of these young people started their musical expertise and talent in schools through the education system. With regard to retaining the culture, that is where it starts and then the community brings it together. I support what he says. For us in Northern Ireland, culture is very important, as it is for him as well.

Douglas Ross: The hon. Gentleman makes a very compelling point. We have to remember that what young people learn at school and through extra-curricular activities outside school at a young age will stay with them throughout their life. They will improve in their music playing and other things during their life, but getting that early introduction is vitally important.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): My hon. Friend has mentioned the benefits of a child learning a skill and that skill staying with them through adulthood and beyond. Does he agree that there are also social benefits to being part of a school band? I have friends who will be friends for life because they came together with the school band.

Douglas Ross: I do agree. I am not sure if my hon. Friend is speaking only about social partnerships and connections that happen in bands at school, because I know that he sometimes plays alongside the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) in MP4, and I am not sure if that bond of friendship continues within MP4.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): My hon. Friend is speaking very passionately about this important subject. Indeed, this debate has struck a chord with many of my constituents. A number of parents have been in touch. Kirstin Murray from Bingham, Clare Moore from Galashiels, Harriet Campbell from Kelso, Arthur Parsons from Duns and Lyn More from Galashiels all have children who have had the benefits of learning a musical instrument at school. They have spoken not only about the benefits from a social perspective—many have spoken about the opportunities it has created for employment once children leave school through having that skill developed by music tuition.

Douglas Ross: My hon. Friend, despite the terrible pun at the beginning of his intervention, makes an extremely important point. We have just got six or seven copies of Hansard heading up to his constituency tomorrow because of that.

I want to look briefly at two other points that were raised by the Scottish Parliament’s Committee about the wider benefits to the economy of a musically enabled society. This evidence came from Kirk Richardson of the Educational Institute of Scotland, who pointed out that Scotland accounts for 11% of the UK’s live music revenue and that music tourism brings about £280 million a year to Scotland and secures more than 2,000 full-time jobs. In 2015 alone, 720,000 foreign and domestic visitors came to the country for festivals and major music concerts. He said:

“If music tuition is allowed to die, there will be a huge commercial loss to the country. We need to wake up to that.”

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Much of Celtic Connections is based in my constituency, so we really see the benefit of music tourism. Does the hon. Gentleman agree about the benefits for young people within communities? I am lucky to have the Sistema Big Noise orchestra based in Govanhill, and it brings young people from various schools together to bring the whole community together. Does he see the value in having such organisations providing things that go right across different schools?

Douglas Ross: I could not agree more with the hon. Lady. The Moray Youth Orchestra meets every Saturday, and transport is provided to take in kids from all...
schools from all over—they come from Aberlour and Milne’s to Elgin. They meet once a week to get excellent tuition, but they also bond with other pupils from schools across Moray.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about the financial dividend, but does he agree there is a social dividend, too, in allowing individuals to build their confidence? All too often, we see young people who seem to struggle with their confidence at an age when they have to deal with Instagram, exam pressure and all that sort of thing, and this is a great opportunity to allow them to blossom, to grow in themselves and to gain confidence.

Douglas Ross: My hon. Friend gives me a great opportunity to introduce the last piece of evidence I want to highlight. Alice Ferguson, a Member of the Scottish Youth Parliament, said that, as a result of learning to play a musical instrument, she felt she became more resilient, confident and open-minded in everything she does. Importantly, she also said that she benefited from the creativity and from the feeling that she was part of a community, part of a band, and that it was really good for her mental health.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his speech, and I am sorry to learn of the circumstances in his constituency. Does he agree that music and song can transform the lives of people with learning difficulties? Will he join me in welcoming the fact that, following their success at the London Palladium, David Stanley and the Music Man Project will be taking more than 200 youngsters to perform at the Albert Hall on Monday 15 April? After that, they hope to go to Broadway.

Douglas Ross: I wholeheartedly congratulate David Stanley and the Music Man Project on taking so many young people to perform in those prestigious venues. Maybe that is yet another reason why Southend-on-Sea should be considered to be made a city. These things add up.

Policy makers and budget leaders need to wake up to the crisis we are facing. Our young people need their representatives to stand up for musical instruction, and not to see it cut time and again. We cannot let it become available only for those who get tuition for free or those from rich enough families, for whom staggering increases for music tuition continues, we will lose pupils and instructors. I worry that, by the time we all come round to realising the detrimental effect that this has had, it will be too late. JFK famously said: “Children are the world’s most valuable resource and its best hope for the future.”

We must ensure that young people in Moray, in Scotland and across the UK have the musical resources to give them the brightest possible future.

10.20 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): I congratulate my hon. Friend. The Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) on securing this debate. He is right that music can transform lives and introduce young people to a huge range of opportunities and skills, but we have heard today how Moray Council is increasing the cost of instrumental music tuition by 85%, which risks depriving many pupils of the pleasure of learning to play a musical instrument—something that we must strive to avoid. I look forward to one day hearing my hon. Friend playing a triangle, or perhaps we could listen to my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris), who is sitting behind me and who played sessions for Whitesnake and Duran Duran in the 1980s.

In November 2011, we published the national plan for music education, which sets out our vision for music education. The vision is to enable children from all backgrounds and every part of England to have the opportunity to learn a musical instrument, to make music with others, to learn to sing, and to have the opportunity to progress to the next level of excellence. The national plan runs until 2020, and we confirmed last month that we would refresh it.

The Government are committed to ensuring that every child receives a high-quality music education. That is why music is an important part of a broad and balanced curriculum and is statutory for all pupils aged five to 14 in state maintained schools. Instrumental tuition is a key part of a music education, and that is reflected in the national curriculum. For example, at key stage 1, pupils should be taught to play tuned and untuned instruments musically and, at key stage 2, they should be taught to play and perform in solo and...
ensembles are available in the area.

Schools are responsible for delivering the music curriculum, in exactly the same way that they are responsible for delivering the curriculum in other subjects, but we recognise that they cannot do that alone. Our network of music education hubs can support schools to provide high-quality music tuition. Between 2016 and 2020, we are providing over £300 million of ring-fenced funding for music education hubs in addition to the funding that goes to schools to deliver the curriculum.

England has 120 music education hubs that were set up in 2012 to drive up the quality and consistency of music education across the country. We have given the hubs four core roles, with instrumental tuition at their heart. The four roles are to ensure that every child aged five to 18 has the opportunity to learn a musical instrument through whole-class ensemble teaching, to provide opportunities for pupils to play in ensembles and to perform from an early stage, to ensure that clear progression routes are available and affordable to all young people, and to develop a singing strategy to ensure that every pupil sings regularly and that choirs and other vocal ensembles are available in the area.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) on securing this debate. Do the hubs also cover paths to composition?

I was struck this morning upon hearing the brilliant composer Sir James MacMillan, who I believe is 60 this year, talk on the radio about how important his musical education at a state school had been to the development of his career.

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend is right that composition is included in the national curriculum, and it is of course important that children learn how to read and write music so that they can actually compose music of their own.

A report by Birmingham City University published last year showed that in 2016-17, hubs worked with 89% of schools on at least one core role and helped more than 700,000 pupils learn to play a musical instrument in whole-class ensemble teaching. In 2013-14—the first year for which like-for-like figures are available—the number was just under 600,000, so that is an increase of 19%. In addition to their work with whole classes, hubs taught hundreds of thousands more children to play instruments or sing. They provided individual lessons for more than 157,000 children, lessons in small groups for more than 238,000 children and lessons in larger groups for more than 145,000 children. We have recently increased their funding by £1.3 million.

Between 2016 and 2020, we are providing almost £120 million to the music and dance scheme, to support exceptionally talented young musicians, dancers and choristers to attend specialist schools such as the Yehudi Menuhin School, Chetham’s School in Manchester and the Purcell School.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating my constituent Jamie King, who is 15 and won a place on the National Youth Orchestra playing the bassoon and was awarded a place at Chetham’s, having learned to play at a primary school in Netherlee? Does that not demonstrate that getting young children into music early in their local primary schools can lead them on to a national stage at such a young age?

Nick Gibb: Yes, I offer Jamie King my warm congratulations on achieving membership of the National Youth Orchestra and on attending Chetham’s, which is not an easy school to secure a place in? We help to fund those places through the music and dance scheme. We are also providing £2 million for national youth music organisations such as the National Youth Orchestra and £2 million for In Harmony.1

While instrumental tuition is important, it is not the only aspect of the curriculum. Earlier this year, I announced that in order to help schools deliver high-quality music education, we were developing a non-statutory model music curriculum for teachers to use in key stages 1 to 3. That will expand on the statutory programmes of study and act as a benchmark for all schools. As well as ensuring that pupils can benefit from knowledge-rich and diverse lessons, the curriculum will make it easier for teachers to plan lessons and help to reduce workload.

We have appointed an expert advisory group, chaired by Veronica Wadley, which will oversee the drafting of the curriculum. She is a former chair of Arts Council London and is a governor of the Yehudi Menuhin School.

Douglas Ross: On that point, will my right hon. Friend reiterate the thanks I gave in my speech to teachers such as John Mustard and everyone involved in music instruction in Moray? The talent they pass on stays with young people for life, and the effort they put in is unquestionable. It would be extremely nice if a Minister at the Dispatch Box of the House of Commons could say that to John and everyone involved in music tuition.

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend beats me to my point. I was going to mention John Mustard and thank him on behalf of the rest of the House of Commons for all the work he has put in and his dedication to teaching, helping hundreds or thousands of young people to acquire a real love of music. I thank John Mustard, and I thank my hon. Friend for raising that.

One of the aims of the national curriculum is for children to perform, listen to, review and evaluate music across a whole range of historical genres, periods, styles and traditions, including the works of the great composers and musicians. I was introduced to classical music at primary school, and I want other children to have the same opportunity, so I was delighted to support and help develop the Classical 100, a free online resource for primary schools, to help teachers introduce their pupils to classical music. It was developed by experts in music education at the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, Classic FM and Decca. More than 5,500 schools in England, 7,500 teachers and an estimated 180,000 pupils have engaged with it since it launched in 2015. The 100 pieces were selected to encourage pupils to explore composers such as J. S. Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Mozart and Tchaikovsky. The most frequently played pieces are “Dido’s Lament”, “Nimrod”, “Londonerry Air”, the “Moonlight” sonata and “Air on the G String”. The online site offers schools a range of flexible resources.

to support teachers, and I hope more schools will sign up to it. Last October, I was delighted to visit Park Lane Primary School in Wembley and present it with a Yamaha Clavinova digital piano for coming first in the Classical 100 challenge.

I think we can all agree that having the opportunity to study and explore music and to learn to play an instrument is not a privilege; it is part of a broad and balanced curriculum, and it is something we must all continue to champion. A strong and rigorous music education is as important a part of a child’s education as science, history and literature. I hope our commitment to music education is clear. The new model curriculum, the new money for our successful music hubs and a refreshed national plan for music education will ensure that the next generation of Adeles, Nigel Kennedys and Alex Turners have all the support they need in and out of school.

Question put and agreed to.

10.29 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Tuesday 26 February 2019

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Transatlantic Alliance

1. Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): What recent progress he has made on strengthening the transatlantic alliance. [909437]

18. Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): What recent progress he has made on strengthening the transatlantic alliance. [909454]

Sir Alan Duncan: The UK works closely with Europe and the US to promote a strong transatlantic partnership. It is vital for our security and prosperity that we work with the US to promote transatlantic unity through NATO. Since July's NATO summit, we have urged allies to increase defence spending and have encouraged the US to recognise the significant allied progress.

Mrs Murray: May I welcome the efforts my right hon. Friend has made in his role to strengthen those ties and ask in particular what assessment he has made of the security and intelligence co-operation between our two countries on which so much of our peace and security depends?

Sir Alan Duncan: The intelligence co-operation between our two countries is enormously valuable. It proceeds regularly on a basis of complete trust and adds importantly to the security of the wider world.

Mary Robinson: Later this year, the UK will host a NATO summit that will mark the 70th anniversary of the organisation's founding. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, as America's closest ally in Europe, we need to be willing to make the argument to our European partners that the financial burden of defending our continent needs to be shared fairly and that other countries need to follow the UK's example by meeting the NATO defence spending pledge?

Sir Alan Duncan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right—indeed, that is exactly what my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has been doing over the past week in his travels around the capitals of Europe—and I fully agree with her, as do Her Majesty's Government, that burden sharing is important. We have been making that point with European partners—NATO partners in Europe—and I am pleased to say that there is progress, but there is still more to be done.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): A strengthened transatlantic alliance could lead to more action in Sri Lanka to tackle human rights abuses. Will the Minister of State urge the Trump Administration to join him and the Foreign Secretary in putting pressure on the Sri Lankan Government to tackle human rights abuses and to respect international calls for a war crimes inquiry?

Sir Alan Duncan: As the hon. Gentleman appreciates, I do not personally cover Sri Lanka. However, I am confident that, across the world, we work very closely together on all issues of human rights, and we will continue to do so in countries as appropriate.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister knows that, after two world wars, we set up the United Nations, we set up NATO and we set up the European Community in an early form to stop our ever having wars again. Is he not concerned about some of the words and some of the actions coming out of the White House under President Trump at the moment?

Sir Alan Duncan: It is a strong pillar of our foreign policy that we believe in multilateral organisations and participate in them fully. Obviously, we will soon be leaving one of them, but that will not diminish our co-operation with the EU27 thereafter.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): What assessment has my right hon. Friend made of the impact on the transatlantic alliance of the recent talks in Vietnam between North Korea and America? Does this have the potential to strengthen our security in the west?

Sir Alan Duncan: My understanding is that those talks are happening today, so it is not easy for me to comment on something that has not quite yet taken place. However, my skills of foresight are well recognised in this House, as I well appreciate. I hope that these conversations and discussions will lead to a more peaceful world and are as successful as we would wish.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Yesterday, the International Court of Justice found that the UK's control of the Chagos islands is illegal and wrong. This damning verdict deals a huge blow to the UK's global reputation. Will the Government therefore heed the call of the ICJ to hand back the islands to Mauritius, or will they continue to pander to the United States military?

Sir Alan Duncan: The hon. Lady is labouring under a serious misapprehension: yesterday's hearing provided an advisory opinion, not a judgment. We will of course consider the detail of the opinion carefully, but this is a bilateral dispute, and for the General Assembly to seek an advisory opinion by the ICJ was therefore a misuse of powers that sets a dangerous precedent for other bilateral disputes. The defence facilities in the British Indian Ocean Territory help to keep people in Britain
and around the world safe, and we will continue to seek a bilateral solution to what is a bilateral dispute with Mauritius.

**UK Soft Power**

2. Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): What steps he is taking to enhance UK soft power overseas. [909438]

16. James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): What steps he is taking to enhance UK soft power overseas. [909452]

23. Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): What steps he is taking to enhance UK soft power overseas. [909459]

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): We should be proud of the UK's soft power and the contribution that independent institutions such as the BBC and the British Council make to it. That is why the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has trebled its investment in Chevening scholarships since 2015, helped to fund the biggest expansion of the BBC World Service in 70 years and provided additional funding for the British Council's work in developed countries. It is also why my Department is developing a cross-Government soft power strategy to further project our values and advance our interests overseas.

Peter Heaton-Jones: The Minister rightly mentioned the BBC World Service. Will he join me in celebrating the excellent work that that organisation does, given how important it is for expressing the UK's soft power overseas, and in calling on the BBC to expand and enhance its reach?

Mark Field: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend. In recognising the excellent work of the BBC World Service, which brings the UK and its values to the world at large. Since 2016, Her Majesty's Government have been funding the World 2020 programme, which has seen the World Service undergo its biggest single expansion in the past 70 years, with 12 new language services opened in 2017-18, and I have been very proud to watch some of that excellent work in India.

James Morris: The plays of Shakespeare have been translated into many languages and performed in many countries around the world, including China, so does the Minister agree that Britain has amazing cultural and linguistic assets that we can use to project our soft power around the world and to support democratic values, freedom of speech and creativity, as we build a new relationship with the world?

Mark Field: I do indeed agree with my hon. Friend. For example, in 2016, the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death was marked by an HMG-funded cultural programme called Shakespeare Lives, which was jointly delivered by the British Council, the GREAT campaign and the FCO, involving the BBC and the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Sir Nicholas Soames: I congratulate my hon. Friend and his colleagues on their excellent work to co-ordinate better our soft power effort, but does he agree that it is very important that there is a proper plan to follow up on some of the very successful royal visits overseas with a very well co-ordinated effort, particularly in soft power?

Mark Field: I thank my right hon. Friend. We have already had questions today on Shakespeare and the BBC, but he is absolutely right that our royal family is one of our greatest soft power assets, and we will do our level best, through the GREAT campaign and elsewhere, to ensure that strength continues.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): An important part of our soft power is our commitment to tackling global poverty and to international development. Will the Minister therefore take this opportunity to reaffirm the Government's commitment to 0.7% spending on overseas aid and to the Department for International Development as a stand-alone Department, independent of the Foreign Office?

Mark Field: I am hearing a lot of chuntering from my left, as I have two DFID Ministers beside me—

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): And a former one.

Mark Field: And a former DFID Minister, too. I agree with the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), and this is a matter not just of soft power, but of hard power. There is little doubt that the 0.7% commitment has an important part to play. I see it in all parts of Asia, not least in Pakistan and Bangladesh, which have the two single biggest DFID budgets. It is important for aid and development and, indeed, for the prosperity fund, which will allow British companies to prosper in the years to come.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Over the past three years, this Government's chaotic approach to Brexit has shredded our international credibility and diminished our soft power. Whether Brexit goes ahead or not, there is an important job to be done to repair our international standing in the world and build alliances, so will the Minister have a word with the Defence Secretary and ask him to cut out the foolish rhetoric, which has real consequences?

Mark Field: I obviously represent Asia and the Pacific abroad, and whenever I go to that part of the world, I always come back much more uplifted about the UK's brand. We find that many countries in that part of the world—indeed, this applies globally—have had strong dealings with the UK for decades, if not centuries, and they recognise that we will have strong connections in the years to come. They know that there is obviously a small amount of uncertainty with the Brexit arrangements that are taking place now, but the positivity of the UK's brand, our reliability as a partner and the sense that we project international values are important.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): The Minister is right to point out outside organisations. Will he, like me, pay due credit to the brave non-governmental organisations that do fantastic work and enhance our soft power in some of the most difficult conflict environments in the world, not least Yemen? Today, the United Nations is appealing for £3.2 billion to help...
organisations such as Saferworld and International Rescue Committee. Should that not be our focus, rather than the £4.6 billion we spent on arms?

Mark Field: We have announced only today, in the aftermath of the Sharm el-Sheikh negotiations, that we will be putting a further £200 million into Yemen. It is important to recognise the tremendous contribution made by so many British citizens and British NGOs across the globe. That is one aspect of soft power that will enhance our standing in the years to come. It is in this sort of area where I hope we will continue.1

Stephen Gethins: I welcome the Minister’s commitment, but that is outstripped by our arms sales. The UK could be a serious player for peace in the region. Will we move away from arming combatants and move towards finances that will help to prevent poverty and migration, because that prevents conflict—not arms sales?

Mark Field: We have made agreements—not least the negotiations that have taken place in recent months in Stockholm—to try to work together to ensure that the worst offenders do not continue arms sales. It is not the case that we do not have an eye on the ethics and the moral values that are close to the heart of many of our constituents across the country. We will continue to work closely and utilise as much soft power as we can in the years to come.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): May I urge the Government to use their soft power and diplomatic network to enthusiastically support the efforts of Cypriots to deliver a negotiated settlement for a free and united Cyprus?

Mark Field: I am happy to answer that in short order: yes. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Europe and the Americas has worked tirelessly in that regard and we will continue to do so. I think that those in the diaspora in the UK, both Turkish and Greek Cypriots, recognise that it is important that we put 45 years of great difficulty behind us. I think that the UK has had an important part to play in helping to bring those sides together.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): We are discussing soft power. I want to ask the Minister about an issue where the exercising of that power is growing long overdue. When we gather for the next Foreign Office questions, six months on from the Khashoggi murder, be telling us all the people he believes are responsible and what action they are going to take in response?

Mark Field: As I said, my right hon. Friend will be in Saudi Arabia and clearly, this issue will be discussed. I hope that he will be in a position to update the House on 2 April or, indeed, prior to that time. The right hon. Lady raised the issue of the arms trade. We are proud to build on the contribution made by Robin Cook when he was Foreign Secretary that means that arms sales regulations here in the UK are among the strictest across the western world, and they will continue in that vein.

Iran’s Ballistic Missile Programme

3. Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of Iran’s ballistic missile programme.

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): Iran’s ballistic missile programme presents a threat to the security of the middle east and Europe that cannot be ignored. The Foreign Secretary raised the issue of ballistic missiles with Foreign Minister Zarif in Tehran on 19 November, and on 5 December, the Foreign Secretary issued a statement following Iranian testing of a medium-range ballistic missile. Alongside our partners, we continue to call on Iran to act consistently with all UN Security Council resolutions in relation to its ballistic missile programme.

Rachel Maclean: Earlier this month, crowds on the street chanted, “Death to Theresa May,” and called for the destruction of Israel and America. Will the Minister condemn that rhetoric, and does he share my concern that President Rouhani has also stated that he is going to continue his programme of uranium enrichment?

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend is right: of course, the rhetoric that flows so often from staged public demonstrations in Tehran does not help very much, but it has to be seen in the context of Iranian politics. On uranium production, the International Atomic Energy Agency recently confirmed for the 15th time that Iran was not in breach of the provisions of the joint comprehensive plan of action. We still believe that that

is a fundamental bank of relationships with Iran to try to curtail its activities, and of course we would strongly condemn any move away from those JCPOA principles by Iran.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): Is the Minister concerned, as I am, that Iran is using Yemen as a testing ground for its missile programme? We have seen the UN panel of experts talk about the new kamikaze drones that are coming out of Iran. We have had the Badr-1—the missile system that looks like the V2—being launched into Saudi Arabia, and we are seeing from technical reports that the enhancements being applied by Iran in that war are considerable. This is very worrying.

Alistair Burt: The UN has already declared that missiles of Iranian origin have been fired from Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen towards Saudi Arabia, sometimes with lethal effect. Of course, it is essential to get the conflict in Yemen to an end to prevent that sort of threat, to prevent it being used as a base for the testing of weapons and to bring some comfort and humanitarian relief to people in Yemen.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Is it not the case that neither the carrot of the nuclear deal nor the stick of sanctions and other policy measures has so far encouraged Iran to be a responsible member of the international community? What more does the Minister think can be done to persuade Iran to desist from supporting terror, insurgency and pursuing its ballistics programme?

Alistair Burt: My right hon. Friend is right, and of course the short answer is that we keep on going, because the consequences of a confrontation leading to a conflict in the middle east involving Iran and others would be catastrophic. We will continue with our efforts. We have sanctions against elements in Iran. There are the economic sanctions employed by the United States and others, but we have to keep looking for a way in which we end the risk of a serious confrontation in the middle east. It is not to be encouraged by harsh rhetoric on either side, and I think that the United Kingdom’s diplomatic efforts to try to bring some resolution in the area are the best thing that we can do.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Given the extent of the human rights abuses of the Iranian regime, the detention of British citizens and so on, and the continued state sponsorship of terrorism and terrorist groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas, how does the Minister assess the success of the nuclear deal and efforts to bring Iran into a proper state of affairs as far as international relations are concerned?

Alistair Burt: The right hon. Gentleman puts together two things, quite rightly. First, the success of the nuclear deal can be measured in the fact that, as I said, the IAEA confirms that there has been no progress by Iran in relation to its nuclear ambitions. That is important in its own context, but secondly, did it lead to any change in behaviour in the region? The short answer is that no, it did not, so we need to continue to demonstrate that we are as concerned about the other aspects of Iran’s behaviour as we are about nuclear issues and get to see some change in that behaviour if we are to avoid the confrontation that I mentioned earlier.

Persecution of Christians

4. Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help tackle the persecution of Christians overseas.

7. Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his counterpart in China on the persecution of Christians in that country.

22. Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help tackle the persecution of Christians overseas.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): The UK has long championed freedom of religion, but I am concerned that we could do more for the 240 million Christians estimated to be facing persecution for their faith around the world. I have therefore asked the Bishop of Truro to conduct an independent review into what more the FCO can do. Last week, I agreed the terms of reference for his review.

Jeremy Lefroy: I thank the Foreign Secretary for that review. When I meet Christians from countries where they are under pressure or persecuted, I see loyal citizens who contribute enormously to those countries, whether in health, education, business or so much else. Why do those countries persecute their citizens for their faith?

Mr Hunt: It is often because they are in the grip of totally misguided ideologies. I thank my hon. Friend for his long championing of this issue. It is a little known fact that around 80% of the people who suffer persecution for their faith are Christians, often in some of the poorest countries in the world—and particularly in the middle east, which 100 years ago had a population that was about 20% Christian. Now that is down to 5%.

Maria Caulfield: Given that a third of Christians in China and Asia are experiencing high-level persecution—that is 140 million people—what discussions have the Government had with the Chinese to end that? What protection can the Government give those Christians facing persecution?

Mr Hunt: We do all we can to raise these issues. I raised freedom of religion issues with my counterpart, Foreign Minister Wang Yi, when I went to China last August. We raised them in November in the Universal Periodic Review—a regular review of human rights issues in China. The noble Lord Ahmad is in Geneva this week for the UN Human Rights Council, where he will also be raising the issue of freedom of religion in China. My hon. Friend is right to be concerned.

Mike Wood: It was reassuring to see the Pakistan Government protecting the independence of their courts in overturning the blasphemy conviction against Asia Bibi. What support are this Government giving the new Government in Pakistan to ensure consistent protection of Christians from persecution?

Mr Hunt: We have excellent relations with the new Government of Pakistan; in fact, I spoke to the Pakistani Foreign Minister yesterday. We co-operated on the Asia Bibi issue. We wanted to support them because we
recognise that the situation on the ground there is extremely fragile. They are trying to do the right thing. As one of the biggest aid donors to Pakistan, we play a crucial role in stiffening their resolve to do the right thing.

**Ann Clwyd** (Cynon Valley) (Lab): As the Foreign Secretary will know, the Chinese face mounting criticism over the treatment of Uighur Muslims, up to 1 million of whom are said to be in detention. What action are we taking in Geneva to try to establish oversight of the situation of the Uighur Muslims?

**Mr Hunt:** On 4 July last year, Lord Ahmad, who is in Geneva at the moment, was appointed the Prime Minister’s special envoy for freedom of religious belief. He is himself from a persecuted Muslim minority, so he understands these issues. The answer is that China is, of course, a sovereign country but we raise this issue at every opportunity. We are very concerned about it. If we do not raise these issues, we have to ask who will. That is why we have a big obligation.

**Dr David Drew** (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): The continuing bloodshed in the Sudan is threatening Christians and Muslims alike. What plans do the Government have to deal with the Bashir regime, to make sure that we bring some peace to that bedevilled country?

**Mr Hunt:** My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East met the Foreign Minister of Sudan yesterday. We remain concerned; Sudan is one of the five countries where Christians suffer the worst persecution, alongside North Korea, Somalia, Afghanistan and one other country. We are very concerned and continue to raise the issue at every opportunity.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): First, I thank the Foreign Secretary for his hard work and dedication to the job in hand. I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary groups on international freedom of religion or belief and on Pakistani minorities. Christians are being persecuted across the world. What steps is the Foreign Secretary taking to collect data about persecuted Christians and belief groups in order to support policy making?

**Mr Hunt:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise that issue. Good data is available from the campaigning organisation Open Doors, from which we get the figure that there are 240 million persecuted Christians around the world. One of the recommendations that I am sure the Bishop of Truro will be considering is whether we need to be more robust in our data collection, so that we can better inform debates in this House.

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con) rose—

**Mr Speaker:** One sentence! Tom Tugendhat.

**Tom Tugendhat:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. [Laughter] The Bishop of Truro’s review of the Foreign Office’s work is very welcome. Will the Foreign Secretary include Ministers in other Departments to ensure that the Bishop’s work in relation to the persecution of Christians, and the British Government’s handling of that support, are cross-governmental?

**Mr Hunt:** I shall try to give a one-sentence answer. The Bishop is free to make whatever recommendations he likes, and we have facilitated introductions to other Departments so that he can liaise with them during his review.

**Zimbabwe**

5. **Sir Henry Bellingham** (North West Norfolk) (Con): What recent assessment the Government have made of the prospects for peace and stability in Zimbabwe. [909441]

25. **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): What recent assessment the Government have made of the prospects for peace and stability in Zimbabwe. [909461]

**The Minister for Africa** (Harriett Baldwin): Fundamental political and economic reform in line with Zimbabwe’s own constitution is vital for a peaceful and stable Zimbabwe. I spoke to Foreign Minister Moyo on 29 January, and made clear that the Zimbabwean Government must investigate all alleged human rights violations and deliver on President Mnangagwa’s public commitment to reform.

**Sir Henry Bellingham:** Does the Minister agree that, first, the elections in Zimbabwe were seriously flawed, and secondly, the recent repression of peaceful protests was completely unacceptable and outrageous? Can she confirm that there is currently no question of Her Majesty’s Government’s supporting Zimbabwe’s return to the Commonwealth, and does she agree that we should now consider extending targeted sanctions?

**Mr Speaker:** According to my assessment, two agreements and one confirmation are required.

**Harriett Baldwin:** I agree, Mr Speaker. There were at least three questions in there, and I will try to answer all of them.

External and international observers were invited to see the recent elections, and judged that, while imperfect, they were freer and fairer than those that took place in 2013 and 2008. As for sanctions, my hon. Friend will be aware that, along with the EU, we renewed them recently, targeting specific individuals and focusing on one organisation.

Zimbabwe has applied to join the Commonwealth. I must say that given the recent behaviour of the security forces, it would be difficult for the UK to support the application were it to come before the Commonwealth Secretariat in the near future, but that is a hypothetical situation.

**Peter Aldous:** In view of the continuing police and army brutality, will the UK Government immediately withdraw any support for the review of Zimbabwe’s relationship with the international community, step up efforts—working with neighbouring states—to hold President Mnangagwa to account, and ensure that the Home Office does not deport any asylum seekers to Zimbabwe while the current human rights violations continue?

**Harriett Baldwin:** My hon. Friend asked about the ongoing engagement with neighbouring countries. I discussed the situation in Zimbabwe recently with the
South African Government, the Government of Mozambique and the new high commissioner from Botswana. I think it important for those in the region to send similar messages about addressing the recent well documented and credible reports. My hon. Friend may want to raise the Home Office issues with Home Office colleagues, but my understanding is that around the world the UK would return people to their country of origin only when we and the courts considered it safe to do so.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): On 12 February, my constituent Victor Mujakachi was detained. The intention was to deport him to Zimbabwe, which has seen tragic human rights abuses in the past few months. What assessment did the Government undertake of the human rights situation in that country before they sought to deport Victor and others?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Lady will, of course, want to raise that case with Home Office colleagues, but my understanding is that each case is taken on its merits, and that neither the UK Government nor our courts would deport someone unless it was widely agreed by the courts that it was safe to do so.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the Minister not agree that much more direct liaison is needed between the nation states in the south of Africa to ensure that greater pressure is applied for efforts to impose additional sanctions that will produce the desired result in Zimbabwe?

Harriett Baldwin: I do not think we can particularly count on the southern area nations for support for sanctions; in fact their public statements have been critical of the sanctions that the EU has put in place. However, the UK believes there is a role for very specifically targeted sanctions on individuals and Zimbabwe defence industries, and we believe that those sanctions do not have a wider economic impact that harms the people of Zimbabwe.

Mr Speaker: Distinction to be equalled only by brevity: I call Mr Andrew Mitchell.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Since 14 January there has been wholesale persecution by the military of the civilian population: documented cases of rape of civilians by the military, use of live rounds, and 17 civilians shot dead. Will the Minister make clear through our excellent new British high commissioner in Harare the terrible price Zimbabweans are paying for the economic mismanagement of their country and the subversion of the rule of law?

Mr Speaker: I think distinction is still a long way ahead.

Harriett Baldwin: I join my right hon. Friend in paying tribute to our ambassador and indeed the whole team in our embassy in Harare, who are working heroically on what have been some sickening reports from credible sources. He will know that we provide a wide variety of support to civil society in Zimbabwe, and I had a meeting with civil society leaders when I was in South Africa recently. My right hon. Friend will be aware that for their own security we cannot disclose which organisations we support, but we endorse the credible reports he alludes to.

Israel and Palestine

6. Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): What recent diplomatic steps he has taken towards helping to secure a lasting peace between Israel and Palestine.

Harriett Baldwin: I have here the names of four young Palestinians, all under the age of 18, who are currently in prison: Yacobb Qawasneh, Akram Mustafa and Ahmad Silwadi, and one who is 15 years old, Akram Daa’dou, who in the early hours of the morning in the presence of—

Mr Speaker: Order. Resume your seat, Mr Russell-Moyle. There is a lot of pressure on time. We have not got time for lists; what I want is a question with a question mark, and then we will have a ministerial answer.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I have here the names of four young Palestinians, all under the age of 18, who are currently in prison: Yacobb Qawasneh, Akram Mustafa and Ahmad Silwadi, and one who is 15 years old, Akram Daa’dou, who in the early hours of the morning in the presence of—

Alistair Burt: Through the consulate-general in Jerusalem we regularly express concerns to Israel about activity relating to minors on the west bank. We have offered help and support for dealing with children who may have been detained and we are constantly in contact about any risk of incursion there and the effect on civil rights.

Karen Lee: Labour is committed to a peaceful two-state solution that guarantees a secure Israel alongside a viable state of Palestine. For anyone working towards that goal it is worrying that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has struck an election deal with two extreme nationalist parties whose leading members have advocated the forced expulsion of millions of Palestinians. Will the Minister commit to using all available diplomatic measures to ensure that that coalition does not threaten a peaceful two-state settlement?
Alistair Burt: Coalitions in Israel and matters affecting the Israeli elections are not a matter for the UK Government. Our position on a two-state solution and a comprehensive solution to the middle east peace process is exactly the same as that of colleagues on the other side of the House and, as I said earlier, it is a fundamental part of UK foreign policy that we will continue to press for that.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): One of the big problems the Palestinians have is that they do not speak with one voice. Is there any sign of a reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas?

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend is right; the issues between those in authority on the west bank and those in Gaza—between Fatah and Hamas—have long been a difficulty in getting a consistent Palestinian voice. My understanding is that conversations about reconciliation are continuing, and they are being handled very much by the Government of Egypt. If there is to be the peaceful settlement of issues in the middle east peace process that we want, it is essential that there is a consistent voice from Palestinians based around the Quartet principles and that the efforts made towards security and peace by the Palestinian Authority over a lengthy period are followed by others.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): I welcome the decision of the British Government to proscribe Hezbollah. Would my right hon. Friend care to consider the distinction between Iran, which is using its rocket technology to produce ballistic missiles, and Israel, which will shortly be landing a scientific explorer on the moon?

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend is right to make reference to the fact that the United Kingdom has found it impossible to continue any longer with the distinction between the military and political wings of Hezbollah, hence my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary’s decision yesterday in relation to proscription. Israel’s scientific technology and its progress in recent decades has been quite remarkable, and the use of technology for peace is something that we would all wish to see, but it is a complex region and a difficult neighbourhood. We support continuing efforts for peace in the region.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Too often, resolution of this conflict feels like a lost cause, but the British Government could prevent that from being the case by recognising the state of Palestine formally. Why will they not do that?

Alistair Burt: As I think the House knows, I have been anxious for many years to ensure that this is not a lost cause and that we have to keep at it. It remains fundamental in the region, and we will keep at it. The recognition of a state of Palestine would not, per se, end the issue, but we are pledged to do that when it is in the best interests of peace and of the peace process in the region.

Leaving the EU: Diplomatic Network

8. Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What plans he has to expand the UK’s diplomatic network after the UK leaves the EU.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): On 31 October, I announced the largest expansion of our diplomatic network for a generation. It involves opening 14 new diplomatic posts and 335 additional personnel overseas, and it will raise the number of sovereign missions to 161, second only to the USA and China.

Stephen Metcalfe: I have seen at first hand the value of our missions around the world to raising our global aspirations, so I particularly welcome the announcement of the new posts and missions in Africa. What thought has been given to ensuring that those roles work across trade, diplomacy and development?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to ask that question, particularly about Africa, where the high commissioner or ambassador is the most senior person on the ground and has people from all Government Departments in the UK reporting to him. Making sure that we have a one-Government approach to our diplomacy will be a central part of our new fusion doctrine.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Does the Foreign Secretary intend to continue sanctions against those persons, groups and entities currently subject to EU sanctions?

Mr Hunt: Broadly speaking, yes.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that this newly strengthened diplomatic network should work in tandem with our soft power influences, such as using 40 Commando, based in Taunton Deane, to be rushed out in times of natural disasters or hurricanes, as happened in the Caribbean? Working together, we can really demonstrate the qualities of this great nation.

Mr Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend, the consul for Taunton Deane. On the expansion of the diplomatic network, among the 14 new overseas posts will be three new resident commissioners, in Antigua and Barbuda, in Grenada and in St Vincent the Grenadines, which I hope might be of interest to colleagues thinking about their careers.

Mr Speaker: When the hon. Lady is not in Taunton Deane, she could trek around some of those territories if she were so inclined.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Africa, I welcome the expanded network. Following our recent constructive meeting with the Immigration Minister, may I urge the Secretary of State to meet her to see how the network can be used to support cultural and business exchanges between African countries and the UK, and particularly to provide the local knowledge that is essential for visa applications, which remain a matter of huge concern?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that if we are going to get this right we have to combine all that we do, particularly in terms of our soft power. The British Council has an immensely important role in Africa. In particular, we need to be better at joining up
the work between the Department for International Development and the Foreign Office, and that is why we are proud to have joint Ministers on the Front Bench to ensure that that happens.

**Equal Rights Coalition**

9. Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): What plans has he for the UK in its role as co-chair of the Equal Rights Coalition in 2019-20. [909445]

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): The UK looks forward to co-chairing the Equal Rights Coalition with Argentina from May this year. We will use our role to promote and protect LGBT rights globally.

Nick Herbert: I thank the Minister for that answer. It is good news that the UK is taking over this role, but the Equal Rights Coalition is in its infancy and needs more work to ensure that the global fight for LGBT rights is effective. Will the Minister assure me that she will commit sufficient resources to the UK’s chairmanship of the Equal Rights Coalition and ensure effective co-ordination between Departments in this important year?

Harriett Baldwin: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend’s leadership and to his all-party parliamentary group on global lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights for drawing cross-Government work together. I can assure him, on behalf of both the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development, that we will certainly give the organisation the resourcing it needs. He will be aware that its work fits in with the Equalities Office’s overall strategy, including the international element.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): We have seen a repressive crackdown on the LGBT community in Egypt, with routine detentions even for waving rainbow flags on social media. What can the Minister do to raise such concerns? Does she still believe, as the previous Foreign Secretary claimed, that—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Blurt it out, man; don’t be distracted.

Gerald Jones: Does she still believe, as the previous Foreign Secretary claimed, that the UK should act as a champion for the Sisi regime that is carrying out the repression?

Harriett Baldwin: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East and our ambassador to Egypt regularly raise the examples that the hon. Gentleman cites as part of the ongoing engagement with the Egyptian Government.

**Human Rights**

10. Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What steps he is taking to promote human rights globally. [909446]

17. Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): What diplomatic steps his Department is taking to promote and support human rights internationally. [909453]

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): The hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) will be pleased to know that the UK is wholeheartedly committed to the promotion and protection of human rights worldwide. As a result, we continue to support the work of the UN Human Rights Council and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. The UK is one of the longest-standing members of the UNHRC, and we are keen to maintain that record at next year’s elections.

Catherine West: Child soldiers represent a major human rights concern. What more can be done to condemn and improve the situation of child soldiers in Yemen, both those on the Houthi side and, crucially, the Sudanese children being exploited by the Saudi forces?

Mark Field: The hon. Lady is right to point out that the situation is absolutely heartbreaking. I am the father of an 11-year-old son, and boys of roughly that age are fighting in parts of the world such as Yemen. I reassure her that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will raise the matter when he is in Saudi Arabia in the days ahead.

Kerry McCarthy: Human rights defenders around the world are under attack. They are censored, imprisoned and sometimes even murdered for speaking out, and women who speak out in countries such as Saudi Arabia are particularly vulnerable. Does the Minister agree that we need to do more to support the women around the world who are brave enough to stand up for what they believe in?

Mark Field: The hon. Lady is right that that is a major issue. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East raised the matter when he was in the region last week and will continue to do so.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): When I was chair of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, we tried on a couple of occasions to raise human rights violations against LGBT citizens around the world, but our attempts were regularly blocked by Uganda, China, Russia and several other countries. Will the Minister use his influence, particularly in the Commonwealth, to try to raise such issues so that we can give hope to millions of people living in those countries?

Mark Field: My hon. Friend is right that the issue is still contested. We will continue to make the case for LGBT rights, and all Foreign Office Ministers and other Ministers with broader foreign affairs responsibilities will make it clear when abroad that we need to stand up for these important rights.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): On 5 April, Professor Zaffaroni, a justice of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, will present to His Holiness the Pope a report on the consequences of the criminalisation of same-sex relations in the Caribbean. The Government will be invited to be represented at the presentation, so will the Minister ensure that they are?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. These are important issues, and clearly we will be represented at the most senior level possible. It may
be difficult for a Minister to be present, but we will ensure that our ambassadors and other leading figures in the Foreign Office are there to make the case to which he refers.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): Was the Minister as appalled as I was last week that it took an order from the European Court of Human Rights to force the Orbán Government in Hungary to provide food to the starving asylum seekers being held at the border? Further, has the Foreign Office protested to the Orbán Government about this disgraceful episode?

Mark Field: Clearly this is something that causes great concern. The shadow Minister will be aware that it is not an issue for which I have direct responsibility, but I know my right hon. Friend the Minister for Europe and the Americas will ensure that our embassy in Budapest is in a position to make the case in the way he has expressed it. Obviously we will try to return to the House at some point with more information, or so in writing.

Topical Questions

T1. [909462] Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I will travel to Saudi Arabia, Oman and the United Arab Emirates later this week to add further impetus to the peace process in Yemen. My aim is to build on the agreement reached in Stockholm in December, which allowed a sustained reduction in fighting in the port of Hodeidah, and to encourage all sides to carry out the redeployments they agreed at Stockholm. This may be one of the last opportunities to prevent a return to fighting and secure desperately needed humanitarian aid.

Chris Evans: According to Oxfam reports, 6,400 people are being held in Libyan detention camps, which is the result of a deal between Libya and Italy. They have been trying to escape across Europe, only to be returned to Libya. They face malnutrition, violence and human trafficking. Has the Foreign Secretary spoken to Italy and Libya about this deal?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East, who has responsibility for north Africa, spoke to the Libyan Foreign Minister about that issue yesterday, and I spoke to the Italian Foreign Minister last week about immigration issues more generally.

T2. [909463] Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): This Government have done great work supporting marine conservation around the world, but will my right hon. Friend outline what plans the Department has to support the marine protected area around the pristine waters of Ascension Island? This would cost as little as £120,000 a year to enforce and oversee, which represents good value.

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): As pioneers of the first marine protected area in the Southern ocean, the UK is working actively to see new designations in the Weddell sea, the east Antarctic and around the Antarctic peninsula. Ascension Island intends to designate a marine protected area this year, and a consultation is under way.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): The people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo are in an invidious position in that they have the temporary peace and stability that they desperately want and need but a new President for whom they did not vote. Does the Secretary of State agree that we cannot simply shrug our shoulders and say this is a trade-off that we accept but that, instead, the people of the DRC deserve both peace and democracy?

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): The people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo clearly voted for change in December 2018. We urged the Government to hold elections in line with the accord of Saint-Sylvestre. The elections took place on 30 December, and the official announcement has gone against what some observers felt was the case, but the UK is engaging with President Tshisekedi and his team following the elections. We clearly believe that the Congolese people voted for change, and we believe that the new Government need to be as inclusive as possible.

T4. [909466] Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): I welcome the work of the Foreign Office last year in hosting a major international conference on tackling the illegal wildlife trade, but what assessment has the Foreign Office made of the recent decisions made by Japan and Iceland to resume whaling? What steps will the Government take to encourage our friends to change their mind?

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): The UK is disappointed that Japan has announced that it will withdraw from the International Whaling Commission in order to resume commercial whaling, and we urge it to rethink its decision. The Prime Minister raised this with Prime Minister Abe on 10 January, confirming that the UK is and remains strongly opposed to commercial whaling.

T3. [909467] Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): More than 1 million Venezuelan refugees who have been forced to flee Maduro’s humanitarian catastrophe are now in Colombia. I have a large, vibrant Colombian community in Southwark who are very worried about the knock-on impact of that crisis on their country, and on family and friends. What support and resource are the Government giving to the Colombian Government to manage this situation?

Sir Alan Duncan: We are working closely with the Colombian Government in defending the continuation of the peace process. They have borne a massive burden of people who have left Venezuela, and we are at the forefront of European efforts to make sure that we can find a solution in Venezuela, in response to the absolutely unacceptable conduct of Mr Maduro.

T5. [909468] Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Along with the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan), I was in Kosovo last week representing the all-party group. Ministers will be aware of the concerns about...
land swap talks between Kosovo and Serbia. What assessment have the Government made of this and other potential changes to borders in the western Balkans?

Sir Alan Duncan: As I set out to the Foreign Affairs Committee last September, the Government’s assessment is that border changes in the western Balkans would risk instability and contagion in the region and beyond. We support efforts to reach a normalisation agreement between Kosovo and Serbia, one that is deliverable and sustainable, and enjoys wide domestic support in both countries. We would support such an agreement.

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): I was in Bahrain last week, where I met the chair of the independent monitoring committee, who has taken a special interest in some of the cases that have been raised in the UK to make sure that proper human rights are available to those who have been convicted in Bahrain. We still monitor a number of cases, but I urge people to go through that independent process because we are confident that it is genuinely independent and it is making a difference to the administration of justice in Bahrain.

Sir Alan Duncan: Russia’s action against Ukrainian vessels near the Kersch straits on 25 November was not in conformity with international law. Continued Russian restrictions on access to the sea of Azov should be ended immediately. We have worked with our partners to support Ukraine, including through securing political agreement in the EU for new sanctions listings, targeted on those responsible for the attacks on the Ukrainian vessels.

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): EU observers saw that “violence has marred the election day, and significant obstacles to a level playing field remained in place throughout the...electoral campaign”.

What steps are the Government taking to ensure that the rights of minorities during election time in Bangladesh?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his heartfelt question. We were clearly concerned by the outcome of the elections in Bangladesh, and we are waiting for the Electoral Commission to come up with its full report. One aspect of it clearly has to do with various minorities in the Bangladeshi state. I shall be visiting Bangladesh in the course of the next six weeks and hope to be able to write to the hon. Gentleman in due course to answer his question in full.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): My right hon. Friend will have been as shocked as I was to see the appalling scenes of Venezuelan troops using violence and intimidation to prevent vital aid from entering their country, which has been ravaged by socialism for decades. Will my right hon. Friend join me in calling on all parties around the world, and in particular the Labour leadership in this House, to condemn utterly Maduro’s actions and his illegitimate regime in Venezuela?

Sir Alan Duncan: Any and every decent person in this House utterly condemns the barring of much needed humanitarian aid from getting into Venezuela. We all stand together in condemning those who are preventing that much needed source of supplies.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Several British overseas territories are still refusing to implement full transparency and to have public registers of ownership. Why are the Government refusing to obey the command of this House, which was to introduce legislation swiftly? Why are they refusing to do it until 2023?

Sir Alan Duncan: We are fully adhering to the obligations and requirements of the Act that was passed. The hon. Gentleman is quite right that 2023 is the date by which we hope every requirement will be met in respect of public registers.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Will the Minister update us on what steps are being taken to support recently liberated areas in Iraq?

Alistair Burt: Significant ones. I was in Iraq two weeks ago and met the new President of Iraq, and its Prime Minister and Foreign Minister. Iraq knows that it must complete its introductory reconstruction efforts. It is important that those who have been abandoned in the Nineveh plain are able to get back, but the security
situation remains crucial. Only when there is a strong security situation, organised and controlled by the state, will it be safe for everyone to go back. The United Kingdom is playing a leading part to encourage and support the efforts to promote reconstruction and the safety of those who have been displaced.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Fourteen million people in Yemen face the threat of starvation because of a blockade imposed by Saudi Arabia. How can the Government ever justify selling a billion pounds'-worth of weapons per year to a country that is deliberately using famine as a weapon of war?

Mr Hunt: Let me tell the hon. Gentleman that if we had followed his policy and stopped our strategic relationship with Saudi Arabia, there would be no peace process in Yemen and we would not have the first prospect for four years of solving the problem.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The recent terrorist attack by the group Jaish-e-Mohammad in Pulwama, where 49 Indian servicemen and women lost their lives, has been widely condemned. Will my right hon. Friend utter a clear and unreserved condemnation of this suicidal attack and call on Pakistan to stop funding these terrorist groups?

Mark Field: The UK Government unequivocally condemn the appalling terror attack in Pulwama on 14 February. We are actively encouraging the Governments of both India and Pakistan to find diplomatic solutions and to refrain from actions that could jeopardise regional stability. We are also working in the UN Security Council to ensure that the perpetrators are brought to justice.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I have a wonderful Chagossian community in Wythenshawe. In the light of yesterday’s International Court of Justice decision, what does the Minister have to say to that community?

Sir Alan Duncan: I repeat what I said earlier: the court decision yesterday was an advisory opinion, not a judgment. We will continue to uphold our commitments, as we have frequently stated in this House.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): What work are the Government doing to support relations and enhance the interaction between all political groups, in both opposition and government, in Iraq?

Alistair Burt: The formation of the Iraqi Government and the efforts being made—in particular by the President of Iraq, who is from the Kurdish region—to ensure better relationships between Irbil and Baghdad certainly seem to us to be paying dividends. Every effort is being made to enable the relationships to become stronger so that reconstruction right throughout Iraq can take place and it can once again be a strong and independent country in terms of its foreign policy, and serve all its people.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): In the light of the detriment that older people experience globally, what steps is the Foreign Secretary taking to advance a UN convention for the rights of older people?

Mr Hunt: It is an issue that I have a great deal of interest in because of my previous role. I can assure the hon. Lady that, having the third largest development budget in the world, we continue to champion this issue at every opportunity.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): The stability of Lebanon is vital to the wider security situation in the middle east. It has taken Prime Minister Hariri nine months to put together a Government that reflects all the different complex denominations and sects in Lebanon, including several Ministers from Hezbollah. What discussions have the British Government had with Prime Minister Hariri or the Lebanese Government about the proscription of the political wing of that organisation?

Alistair Burt: By good fortune, the Prime Minister and I met the Prime Minister of Lebanon on Sunday at the summit in Sharm el-Sheikh. We were able to discuss not only the issue relating to Hezbollah, but our own efforts to support the stability of the Government of Lebanon. Prime Minister Hariri recognised the support that the United Kingdom gave. We want to see Lebanon’s Government formation completed and also for the Government to go forward economically, a process in which our own investment conference in December was a landmark event.¹

¹[Official Report, 27 February 2019, Vol. 655, c. 2MC.]
Leaving the European Union

12.36 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the Government’s work to secure a withdrawal agreement that can command the support of this House.

A fortnight ago, I committed to come back before the House today if the Government had not by now secured a majority for a withdrawal agreement and a political declaration. In the two weeks since, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the Attorney General and I have been engaging in focused discussions with the EU to find a way forward that will work for both sides. We are making good progress in that work. I had a constructive meeting with President Juncker in Brussels last week to take stock of the work done by our respective teams. We discussed the legal changes that are required to guarantee that the Northern Ireland backstop cannot endure indefinitely.

On the political declaration, we discussed what additions or changes can be made to increase confidence in the focus and ambition of both sides in delivering the future partnership we envisage as soon as possible, and the Secretary of State is following this up with Michel Barnier.

I also had a number of positive meetings at the EU-Arab League summit in Sharm el-Sheikh, including with President Donald Tusk. I have now spoken to the leaders of every single EU member state to explain the UK’s position. And the UK and EU teams are continuing their work, and we agreed to review progress again in the coming days.

As part of these discussions, the UK and EU have agreed to consider a joint workstream to develop alternative arrangements to ensure the absence of a hard border in Northern Ireland. This work will be done in parallel with the future relationship negotiations and is without prejudice to them. Our aim is to ensure that, even if the full future relationship is not in place by the end of the implementation period, the backstop is not needed because we have a set of alternative arrangements ready to go. I thank my hon. and right hon. Friends for their contribution to this work and reaffirm that we are seized of the need to progress that work as quickly as possible.

President Juncker has already agreed that the EU will give priority to this work, and the Government expect that this will be an important strand of the next phase. The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the Attorney General and I will be having further discussions with Michel Barnier and we will announce details ahead of the meaningful vote. We will also be setting up domestic structures to support this work, including ensuring that we can take advice from external experts involved in customs processes around the world from businesses that trade with the EU and beyond—and, of course, from colleagues across the House. This will all be supported by civil service resource as well as funding for the Government to help develop, test and pilot proposals that can form part of these alternative arrangements.

I know what this House needs in order to support a withdrawal agreement and to give the House confidence in the future relationship that the UK and EU will go on to negotiate. This includes ensuring that leaving the EU will not lead to any lowering of standards in relation to workers’ rights, environmental protections or health and safety. Taking back control cannot mean giving up our control of these standards, especially when UK Governments of all parties have proudly pursued policies that exceed the minimums set by the EU, from Labour giving British workers more annual leave to leave the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats giving all employees the right to request flexible working. Not only would giving up control go against the spirit of the referendum result—it would also mean accepting new EU laws automatically, even if they were to reduce workers’ rights or change them in a way that was not right for us.

Instead, and in the interests of building support across the House, we are prepared to commit to giving Parliament a vote on whether it wishes to follow suit whenever the EU standards in areas such as workers’ rights and health and safety are judged to have been strengthened. The Government will consult with businesses and trade unions as it looks at new EU legislation and decides how the UK should respond. We will legislate to give our commitments on both non-regression and future developments force in UK law. And following further cross-party talks, we will shortly be bringing forward detailed proposals to ensure that, as we leave the EU, we not only protect workers’ rights but continue to enhance them.

As the Government committed to the House last week, we are today publishing the paper assessing our readiness for no deal. I believe that if we have to, we will ultimately make a success of a no deal. But this paper provides an honest assessment of the very serious challenges it would bring in the short term and further reinforces why the best way for this House to honour the referendum result is to leave with a deal.

As I committed to the House, the Government will today table an amendable motion for debate tomorrow. But I know Members across the House are genuinely worried that time is running out—that if the Government do not come back with a further meaningful vote, or they lose that vote, Parliament will not have time to make its voice heard on the next steps. I know too that Members across the House are deeply concerned by the effect of the current uncertainty on businesses. So today I want to reassure the House by making three further commitments. First, we will hold a second meaningful vote by Tuesday 12 March at the latest. Secondly, if the Government have not won a meaningful vote by Tuesday 12 March, then they will, in addition to their obligations to table a neutral, amendable motion under section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, table a motion to be voted on by Wednesday 13 March, at the latest, asking this House if it supports leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement and a framework for a future relationship on 29 March. So the United Kingdom will only leave without a deal on 29 March if there is explicit consent in this House for that outcome.

Thirdly, if the House, having rejected leaving with the deal negotiated with the EU, then rejects leaving on 29 March without a withdrawal agreement and future framework, the Government will, on 14 March, bring forward a motion on whether Parliament wants to seek
a short, limited extension to article 50, and, if the House votes for an extension, seek to agree that extension approved by the House with the EU and bring forward the necessary legislation to change the exit date commensurate with that extension. These commitments all fit the timescale set out in the private Member’s Bill in the name of the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). They are commitments I am making as Prime Minister, and I will stick by them, as I have previous commitments to make statements and table amendable motions by specific dates.

But let me be clear—I do not want to see article 50 extended. Our absolute focus should be on working to get a deal and leaving on 29 March. An extension beyond the end of June would mean the UK taking part in the European Parliament elections. What kind of message would that send to the more than 17 million people who voted to leave the EU nearly three years ago now? And the House should be clear that a short extension—not beyond the end of June—would almost certainly have to be a one-off. If we had not taken part in the European Parliament elections, it would be extremely difficult to extend again, so it would create a much sharper cliff edge in a few months’ time. An extension cannot take no deal off the table. The only way to do that is to revoke article 50, which I shall not do, or to agree a deal. I have been clear throughout the process that is to revoke article 50, which I shall not do, or to cannot take no deal off the table. The only way to do

Mr Speaker: Order. This is rather discourteous. The Prime Minister is delivering a statement, and it should be heard. I understand the strong feelings, but colleagues know from the record that everybody will get the chance to question the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister’s statement must be heard.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Tying the Government’s hands by seeking to commandeer the Order Paper would have far-reaching implications for the way in which the United Kingdom is governed and the balance of powers and responsibilities in our democratic institutions, and it would offer no solution to the challenge of finding a deal that this House can support. Neither would seeking an extension to article 50 now make getting a deal any easier. Ultimately the choices we face would remain unchanged: leave with a deal, leave with no deal, or have no Brexit. When it comes to the motion tomorrow, the House needs to come together, as we did on 29 January, and send a clear message that there is a stable majority in favour of leaving the EU with a deal.

A number of hon. and right hon. Members have understandably raised the rights of EU citizens living in the UK. As I set out last September, following the Salzburg summit, even in the event of no deal, the rights of the 3 million EU citizens living in the UK will be protected. That is our guarantee to them. They are our friends, our neighbours and our colleagues. We want them to stay. The commitment I am making as Prime Minister is to protect workers’ rights and the environment, an enhanced role for Parliament in the next phase of negotiations and a determination to address the wider concerns of those who voted to leave, we will have a deal that this House can support. In doing so, we can send a clear message that this House is resolved to honour the result of the referendum and leave the European Union with a deal. I commend this statement to the House.

12.50 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I would like to start by thanking the Prime Minister for an advance copy of her statement.

I have lost count of the number of times the Prime Minister has come to this House to explain a further delay. They say history repeats itself—the first time as
tragedy, the second time as farce—but by the umpteenth
time it can only be described as grotesquely reckless.
This is not dithering; it is a deliberate strategy to run
down the clock. The Prime Minister is promising to
achieve something she knows is not achievable and is
stringing people along, so will she be straight with
people? The withdrawal agreement is not being reopened.
There is no attempt to get a unilateral exit on the
backstop or a time limit.

In Sharm el-Sheikh, the Prime Minister said that
"a delay in this process, doesn’t deliver a decision in parliament, it
doesn’t deliver a deal”.

I can only assume she was being self-critical. She has so
far promised a vote on her deal in December, January,
February and now March, and she only managed to put
a vote once—in January, when it was comprehensively
defeated. The Prime Minister continues to say that it is
her deal or no deal, but this House has decisively
rejected her deal and has clearly rejected no deal. It is
the Prime Minister’s obstinacy that is blocking a resolution,
so if the House confirms that opposition, then what is
the Prime Minister’s plan B?

I pay tribute to others across the House who are
working on such solutions—whether that is the proposal
that is commonly known as Norway-plus or other options.
Labour, I would like to inform the House, will back the
Costa amendment if tabled tomorrow, and I also confirm
that we will back the amendment drafted by the hon.
Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) on
securing citizens’ rights for EU citizens here and for UK
citizens in Europe, some of whom I met in Spain last
week.

The Prime Minister has become quite the expert at
kicking the can down the road, but the problem is that
the road is running out. The consequences of running
down the clock are evident and very real for industry
and for people’s jobs. For now, the Prime Minister states
that the can can be kicked until 12 March, but the EU
cannot now ratify any deal until its leaders summit on
21 March. After all, section 13 of the European Union
(Withdrawal) Act states that the final agreement will be
laid before this House before it can be voted on, so can
the Prime Minister confirm how there can be a vote in
this House if the EU has not yet agreed any final exit, or
is the Prime Minister now saying that there will be no
change to either the withdrawal agreement or to the
political declaration, so we will be voting again on the
same documents?

Every delay and every bit of badly made fudge just
intensifies the uncertainty for industry, with business
investment being held back, jobs being lost and yet
more jobs being put at risk. The real life consequences
of the Prime Minister’s cynical tactics are being felt
across the country, with factories relocating abroad,
jobs being lost and investment being cancelled. Thousands
of workers at sites across Britain’s towns and cities are
hearing rumours and fearing the worst. The responsibility
for this lies exclusively with the Prime Minister and her
Government’s shambolic handling of Brexit. Even now,
with just one month to go before our legally enshrined
exit date, the Prime Minister is not clear what she wants
in renegotiations that have now dragged on since it
became clear in December that her deal was not even
backed by much of her own party, let alone Parliament
or the country at large.

Labour has a credible plan—Labour has a credible plan that could bring the country together,
provide certainty for people, and safeguard jobs and
industry. It is based around a new customs union with
the EU to protect our manufacturing industry, close
alignment with the single market to protect all of our
trading sectors and keeping pace with the best practice
on workers’ rights, environmental protections and consumer
safeguards. The people of this country deserve nothing
less. The Prime Minister talks about giving commitments
on future developments, but that is way short of a
commitment to dynamic alignments on rights and standards
when we know many on her Front Bench see Brexit as
an opportunity to rip up those vital protections.

In recent weeks, I have been speaking to businesses,
industry organisations and trade unions. Last week,
along with our shadow Brexit Secretary, my right hon.
and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras
(Keir Starmer), as well as my hon. Friend the Member
for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) and Baroness Chakrabarti,
I travelled to Europe to meet EU officials and leaders to
discuss the crisis and explain Labour’s proposals. We
left with no doubt whatsoever that our proposals are
workable and could be negotiated, so tomorrow we
will—

Mr Speaker: Order. I indicated to the House that the
Prime Minister should be fairly and courteously heard,
and the same goes for the Leader of the Opposition. If
the usual suspects could just calm down, it would be in
their interests and, more importantly, those of the House.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Tomorrow, we will ask Parliament to vote on these
proposals—they are workable and negotiable—which
back the demands of working people all across this
country and industry all across this country. I urge
Members across this House to back that amendment to
respect the result of the 2016 referendum and to safeguard
jobs, investment and industry in this country. Labour
accepts the result of the 2016 referendum, but we believe
in getting the terms of our exit right, and that is why we
believe in our alternative plan.

The Prime Minister’s botched deal provides no certainty
or guarantees for the future, and was comprehensively
rejected by this House. We cannot risk our country’s
industry and people’s livelihoods, so if it somehow
passes in some form at a later stage, we believe there
must be a confirmatory public vote to see if people feel
that that is what they voted for. A no-deal outcome
would be disastrous, and that is why we committed to
backing the amendment, in the names of my right hon.
Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and
Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and the right hon. Member
for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin), to rule out that
reckless cliff-edge Brexit.

The Prime Minister appears to be belatedly listening
to the House. Any extension is necessary only because
of the Prime Minister’s shambolic negotiations and her
decision to run down the clock, but until the Prime
Minister is clear about what alternative she would put
forward in those circumstances, then she is simply continuing
to run down the clock. She promises a short extension,
but for what? If the Government want a genuine renegotiation, they should do so on the terms that can win a majority in this House and on the terms, backed by businesses and unions, that are contained within Labour’s amendment, which I urge the whole House to back tomorrow.

The Prime Minister: I will first respond to a couple of the right hon. Gentleman’s questions. He asked about the meaningful vote and whether new documents would be brought before the House. Of course, we are in discussions with the EU about changes—changes that this House said it wanted—to the Northern Ireland backstop. We are discussing those with the European Union. Any changes that are agreed with the European Union would be put before this House before the meaningful vote.

The right hon. Gentleman raised the issue of citizens’ rights. As I covered in my statement, the EU does not have the legal authority to do a separate deal on citizens’ rights without a new mandate. This is a matter, unless it is part of the withdrawal agreement—obviously, we have negotiated something within the withdrawal agreement; good rights for citizens within the withdrawal agreement—

for individual member states. We have taken up the issue with individual member states. A number of them have already given good guarantees to UK citizens and we are encouraging those that have not to do so.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to workers’ rights. I think it is important. [Interruption.] I am answering the points that he has made, but he does not seem to be too interested in listening to the answers that I am giving. He advocated dynamic alignment on workers’ rights. I have to say that we on the Government side of the House think that those decisions should be taken in the UK, and in this House. One of the reasons for taking those decisions on workers’ rights in this House, as I have said, is that Governments in this country, of different colours, have consistently given greater rights to workers than the European Union has negotiated.

The right hon. Gentleman referenced the Labour party’s approach to a deal. Of course, its approach is that it wants a customs union, to be in the single market and to have a say on trade deals, in a way that says, “Well, please, if you’re very nice to us, can we sit around the table and maybe some time we might be able to put an opinion on the trade deals?” If he wants the benefits of a customs union—no tariffs, no fees and no charges—

they are there within the political declaration, in the deal that has been negotiated by this Government. In that political declaration, we also have the right for us, as an independent country, to strike our own trade deals again, and not to have to rely on those struck in Brussels.

The right hon. Gentleman then spoke about the time running down to 29 March. My sole focus throughout all of this has been on getting a deal that enables us to leave the European Union on 29 March with a deal. It is the right hon. Gentleman who has kept no deal on the table, by refusing to agree to a deal. He talks about uncertainty on jobs, but he could have voted to end uncertainty on jobs by backing the deal the Government brought back from the European Union.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman says that he and the Labour party accept the result of the referendum, yet we also know that they back a second referendum.

By backing a second referendum, he is breaking his promise to respect the result of the 2016 referendum. He will be ignoring the biggest vote in our history and betraying the trust of the British people.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister on accepting that we are not remotely ready for the chaos of a no-deal departure on 29 March? I agree with her that no deal at any time would bring very damaging medium and long-term prospects for the British economy and our wellbeing. I will continue to vote for any withdrawal agreement that she manages to get with the other EU countries, but I doubt that she will command a majority for any such agreement in the near future.

Can I turn to the real issue now? How long is the delay that we are contemplating? The Prime Minister seems to be giving us a date for a new cliff edge at the end of June, but is not the danger that we will merely present the current pantomime performance through the next three months, and that the public will be dismayed as we approach that date and find that there is similar chaos about where we are going?

May I suggest that we contemplate a much calmer delay, that we have indicative votes following debates in this House, to see where a consensus or majority lies, and then that we prepare our position for the much more important long-term negotiations that have to take place on the eventual settlement? We cannot have several more years of what we have had for the past two years. We have to start proper negotiations with the EU on what exactly we contemplate as our long-term relationships with the Union.

The Prime Minister: Of course, we have the framework for that long-term relationship with the European Union set out in the political declaration—that is the set of instructions to the negotiators for the next stage—but my right hon. and learned Friend is right that we still have to go through that second stage of negotiations. He asked about any extension to article 50, should that be necessary. I am very clear that I do not want to see an extension to article 50. Should we be in the position that such a proposal was put before this House, I would want it to be as short as possible.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of her statement. I have to say that I find myself once again agreeing with the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). There is the possibility that we will extend article 50 beyond the end of June. In the light of that, may I give a helpful suggestion to the Prime Minister? The Scottish National party is already putting in place candidates for the European elections. May I suggest that the Conservatives consider doing the same?

There are only 19 parliamentary days until Brexit day, yet the Prime Minister wants to delay the meaningful vote until 12 March—why? From 12 March, there are only 10 parliamentary days before Brexit. We will have lost nine days in which this issue could have been resolved. The Dutch Prime Minister says:

“We are sleep walking into no deal scenario.”

There was no breakthrough in the 45-minute meeting with the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel. Council President Donald Tusk said that an extension of article 50
would be the “rational” decision. Although, that would suggest that this Government are capable of making rational decisions—there is little evidence of that.

Prime Minister, your strategy to run down the clock is disastrous. Is it not the case that you have continued to fail to reach an agreement on the backstop? Is it not the case that you cannot get the alternative arrangements on the backstop that you promised at the end of—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not trying to get any alternatives to a backstop. Speak through the Chair, man.

Ian Blackford: Mr Speaker, is it not the case that the Government cannot get the alternative arrangements on the backstop that were promised at the end of January, because the EU will not renegotiate? The EU has repeatedly made it clear that the withdrawal agreement is non-negotiable. What does the Prime Minister not get about that?

Prime Minister, businesses and citizens are worried about no deal—worried about the supply of medicines and food. It is the height of irresponsibility for any Government to threaten their citizens with such consequences. The Prime Minister sits and laughs at what she is doing to the people of the United Kingdom—what a disgrace! This Prime Minister indicates that she is simply not fit for office. Prime Minister, will you accept the overwhelming advice of business, MPs and your Cabinet? Rule out no deal and extend article 50, but do it today. This should not be left until the middle of March.

Mr Speaker, we cannot trust this Prime Minister. Parliament should take the opportunity to impose the timeline that she has set out today, so that she cannot dodge this.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman made various references to the discussions with the European Union. He asked why the meaningful vote was not being brought back this week, or before the latest date of 12 March. The answer is that we are taking this time to negotiate the changes required by this House to the deal that we negotiated with the European Union. That includes the work that has been done on alternative arrangements. As I indicated in my statement, further work on those alternative arrangements has already been agreed with the European Union. There were all those questions about there not being an opportunity to renegotiate or get any changes, but that is not the case; we are in talks with the European Union and we are talking about the issues that this House required.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman talked about uncertainty: the uncertainty of not having the arrangements in place. If he wants to end uncertainty and if he wants to deal with the issues he raised in his response to my statement, then he should vote for a deal—simples.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s—

Mr Speaker: Order. I appeal to the House to give the right hon. Gentleman the respectful attention that he probably wants and I think he should have.

Mr Duncan Smith: Very kind of you, Mr Speaker. I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement. Clearly, she is right that we would prefer to have a deal. In the statement, she talked about alternative arrangements, which are based, it appears, on the Malthouse compromise details. May I remind my right hon. Friend that it is clear, behind closed doors, that UK Government officials and the EU recognise that what is currently in the backstop is unworkable and that they will therefore have to implement alternative arrangements? When she sits down with them to ask for that, could she now say that those alternative arrangements must reach a point of a deadline date and be bound legally, so that they cannot renge from that after we leave?

The Prime Minister: In fact, there has not been the suggestion that the arrangements in the backstop are unworkable. What there has been in the discussions with the European Union is an acceptance of the desire to discuss those alternative arrangements, work on them, and have them in place such that, were it the case that we ended the implementation period without the future relationship in place and that insurance policy for no hard border in Northern Ireland was necessary, we would have the alternative arrangements to put in place, rather than the backstop as it is currently within the withdrawal agreement. One of the key issues raised by the European Union around the alternative arrangements actually relates to the significant number of derogations from European Union law that will be necessary to put the alternative arrangements in place.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): While I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister has, at long last and with the greatest reluctance, been persuaded by a group of her own Ministers to accept that there is no majority in this House for leaving the European Union on 29 March with no deal, does she not understand that in all likelihood there will continue to be no majority in the House for leaving with no deal, whether it is March, June or October? Therefore, the question I want to put to her is this: if we are going to have an extension to article 50, what does she intend to use that time for?

The Prime Minister: I have been very clear that I want the work we are currently doing to ensure that we get a deal that can command the support of this House. What I said in my statement is that if we lose another meaningful vote, we will then put a vote to the House on its view on leaving the European Union on 29 March with no deal. Were it the case that the House rejected the meaningful vote and voted for not leaving without a deal, then a motion would come before the House in relation to a short, limited extension of article 50. The right hon. Gentleman talks again—he has raised this previously in the House—about there being no majority for leaving with no deal. As I say, the House has to face up to the fact that if it does not want to leave with no deal then either it wants to stay in the European Union, which would betray the trust and the vote of the British people, or it has to accept and vote for a deal.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): Today’s statement cannot have been easy for the Prime Minister to make, because she is rightly determined that we should honour the result of the referendum. I say that as somebody who campaigned very strongly for us to remain in
the EU. But it probably has not been greeted with great alacrity in the country, because the uncertainty out there, affecting businesses and individuals, is now crushing. Can she please make it clear that a deal which can command a majority of this House is eminently possible if there can be agreement on changes to the backstop and putting in place alternative arrangements? Can she also confirm that it is then incumbent on MPs on all sides of the House to vote for this deal, which will be in the national interests of this country?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. First, in the talks with the European Union we are discussing delivering the changes required by this House regarding its concern about the potential indefinite nature of the backstop. There is the prospect—I believe we have it within our grasp—to get an agreement such that we can leave the European Union on 29 March with a deal. When those changes are brought back I hope, as my right hon. Friend says, that every Member of this House will recognise their responsibility to deliver on the vote of the referendum in 2016 to deliver Brexit, and to do it in the best way possible, which is with a deal.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Prime Minister has said, for the first time, that she is willing to put a motion extending article 50. I hope that reflects the strong arguments that have been made from all parts of the House about the damage no deal would do to this country. But she also know that promised votes have been pulled before, that Commons motions have been ignored before, and that when the Commons previously voted against no deal the Brexit Secretary told the House that Government policy was still to leave on 29 March with no deal if the deal had not been passed. He said:

“Frankly, the legislation takes precedence over the motion”. — [Official Report, 14 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 1070.]

If there is no legislation in place, what assurances do we have that: votes will definitely be put; the Government will abide by any motions; and the entire Cabinet will abide by any votes? What will the Government’s policy be in those circumstances? Will it be to argue for no deal or will it be to argue for an extension?

The Prime Minister: First, the right hon. Lady references the Cabinet. This has been discussed by Cabinet, so this is a position that the Government have taken. I would not have brought it before the House today if it were not a position that the Government had taken on this issue.

I have set those dates. If she would care to look at what I have been doing over recent weeks, she will see the points where I have said I would come back today. On the previous time I came back to the House there was a guarantee that I would come back to the House. I said I would bring a motion, and we brought a motion. We will bring a motion tomorrow. So there is a clear and firm commitment from this Government to ensure that we bring those votes to this House. The House then has that opportunity.

I recognise the concern of right hon. and hon. Members to ensure that the voice of the House is heard. That is why I said that those votes will be brought before the House should we lose the meaningful vote. I continue to want to see this House supporting a meaningful vote, so that we can leave with a deal. As she will have heard in my statement, in the case that a vote for no deal and then a vote for an extension had not been put forward, we would take that to the European Union. The decision would not be entirely ours. There has to be a unanimous decision of the 27 member states of the European Union to agree that extension, but were that agreed, we would bring forward the necessary legislation.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend accept that the Bill to delay article 50, to which the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) has just referred, would incur many billions of pounds of taxpayers’ money that would otherwise be available for public services and would otherwise not be handed over to the EU if we left on 29 March? Will she also accept that the Bill is effectively aimed at overturning the democratic will of the British people, which Parliament itself expressly entrusted to the British people and must be honoured?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a number of points about the Bill proposed by the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford. Given the commitments the Government have made in relation to these issues, I hope Members would consider that the mechanisms in the Bill have constitutional implications beyond simply the Brexit issue, in terms of the relationship between Government and Parliament, and our democratic institutions going forward. I have been clear today. I want to see a deal that this House can support and which enables us to leave on 29 March with a deal. That is what the Government are working on and that is what the Government continue to work on.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): The Prime Minister is right that simply postponing a cliff edge for three months is pointless or worse, but now that the Leader of the Opposition has listened to advice from his colleagues, Liberal Democrat Members and others and accepted the principle of a people’s vote with the option to remain, will she not listen to the advice of her own Ministers, who are saying that a no-deal Brexit—whether at the end of March or the end of June—would be so damaging that it must now be firmly ruled out?

The Prime Minister: I say to the right hon. Gentleman yet again that he talks about firmly ruling out a no-deal option and there are only two alternatives to no-deal: one is to revoke article 50 and stay in the European Union, which we will not do, and the other is to agree a deal. If he wants to take no deal off the table, I hope that when the deal is back, he will vote for that deal.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): It is abundantly clear just from listening to the questions today that there is not a consensus in this House and that we do face gridlock. We have now run down the clock, and rather than wasting more time repeating votes that we have already had and that this House has already expressed its will on—for example, on no deal and on the Government’s deal and the withdrawal agreement—is it not now time that we all put our effort into recognising the gridlock and taking responsibility for deciding how we get out of it? I do not believe that it is going to change and we can keep on going round in circles, with
all the damage that that does to businesses and jobs, or we can confront it, decision it and find a route forward for Britain.

The Prime Minister: Obviously, I recognise that my right hon. Friend feels very strongly about these issues. I want to see us able to deliver on the result of the referendum and to do that in what I believe is the best way for this country, which is to leave with a deal. That is what we will be working on. She talks about decision points. There will be a decision point for this House in a meaningful vote, looking at the changes that have been agreed with the European Union, and at that stage, I hope that every Member of this House will recognise the need to respect the result of the referendum in 2016 and to leave the European Union with a deal.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Is not the crucial difference between what the Prime Minister is proposing and the proposal of the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), who chairs the Home Affairs Committee, that theirs is watertight and legally binding and that the Prime Minister’s is not. Given the number of times that she has gone back on her word and caved in to the European Research Group, why should we trust anything she is saying?

The Prime Minister: There is a difference between the proposal that the right hon. Gentleman refers to and the commitments that I have given today—that is, the proposal that has been put forward goes much wider than the issue of Brexit. I have a concern about the future relationship between the Government and Parliament—about ensuring that we can continue to maintain what has been a balanced relationship between the Government and Parliament that has stood this country well over many years and about retaining that into the future.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister and the Brexit Secretary on persuading the European Union to accept a taskforce to work up the alternative arrangements group’s proposals into a practical proposition, because what has emerged from our discussions is that the customs arrangements have been cut and pasted from the old Turkish agreement. They are archaic and would require 255 million pieces of paper to be stamped with a wet chop, as in Ming dynasty China. If the Prime Minister could make these proposals legally binding with a definitive implementation date, she would remove the toxic backstop and get many Government Members to vote for the agreement. Will she get a legally binding change in the text to deliver that?

The Prime Minister: I say to my right hon. Friend that the commitment is that we will ensure, as I said to our right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), that there are to get to the point of it being necessary to exercise what is known as the backstop, or the insurance policy for no hard border in Northern Ireland, at the end of the implementation period where it is necessary, we want to have the alternative arrangements ready to go at that point such that the backstop, as currently drafted, never needs to be used. That is the aim and the intent. We want to work on this quickly so that we have those clearly ready and understood before that date, but the commitment is to ensure that those alternative arrangements can indeed replace the backstop and ensure that it does not need to be used.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The Prime Minister’s withdrawal deal agreement as proposed in draft was defeated in this House by 230 votes—she hardly needs reminding of that—and the reason primarily for the loss of the majority was the backstop. She has committed to binding legal changes in terms of the backstop, effectively reopening the withdrawal agreement, and she must know that without a legally watertight way out of the backstop, we certainly could not support any future withdrawal agreement brought to this House. Does she think that the machinations of some of her Ministers and the proposals that she has announced today will have the effect in Brussels and on European leaders of making them more likely to concede what is necessary or that perhaps they will just sit back and wait?

The Prime Minister: The discussions I have had in the European Union with EU leaders and, indeed, with the European Commission are very clear: they are entering into those talks with us with the intention of finding a resolution to the issue that this House has raised and that the right hon. Gentleman has just referenced again—that is, to ensure that legally binding change that ensures that people can have the confidence that the issue that the House raised about the potential indefinite nature of the backstop has been addressed and resolved. That is what we are working on. I recognise that the right hon. Gentleman has always been consistent in his references to the need for the right legal status for that change, and that is what we are working for.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I am pleased to hear from my right hon. Friend a willingness to consider the possibility of an extension of article 50 to prevent a catastrophic no-deal Brexit. She also said, rightly, that across this House there are widely divergent views on why the deal that she has negotiated in good faith has been rejected. My concern is simply this: I see no reason to think that that situation will change, because despite what she has done in good faith, it is a second-rate outcome for our country. If this is to continue, how are we indeed to break the logjam? And here I have to say to her that her browbeating of the House, which she did today—indicating that unless we simply go along with a deal that is considered to be inadequate, there is no solution but a no-deal Brexit or a unilateral revocation—is simply inaccurate, because surely it is perfectly possible and utterly democratic for us to go back and ask the public whether the deal she has negotiated is acceptable or not.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and learned Friend says that there are diverse views around this House and that there has been no indication, therefore, why the withdrawal agreement was rejected. Indeed, the House did indicate why the withdrawal agreement was rejected. It did so in a majority vote on 29 January that indicated...
that it was an issue around the backstop, that changes to the backstop were required and that the House would support the withdrawal agreement with the necessary changes to the backstop. I did not try to say that this House has not indicated the result that it wishes to see. He also aims slightly to chastise me on the options that have put before the House today, but I say to him that a second referendum does not change the fact that ultimately, the three options open to us are to leave the European Union with a deal, to leave it with no deal, or to have no Brexit. Those will remain the options.

Anna Soubry (Bromsgrove) (Ind): This is a shameful moment. Nothing has changed—apart from the fact that some of us who used to sit on the Government side are now sitting on the Opposition side. One of the reasons for that is that yet again we see from the Prime Minister can kicking at the same time with the fudge is being created and a failure to put the country and the nation’s interests first. Instead, the future of the Conservative party is put first and foremost. Right hon. and hon. Members who sit on the Government side made it clear that they would vote in accordance with their consciences and the national interest.

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Blunt—be quiet. Be quiet. You are not the arbiter of what the right hon. Lady says. I will be the judge of that. Do not try to shout her down. It is beneath you—and more importantly, it will fail.

Anna Soubry: Actually, I did not hear what the hon. Gentleman said; that is the benefit of being older and a bit deaf, Mr Speaker.

In any event, the important point is this. Right hon. and hon. Members on the Government side—those in government, and senior Back Benchers—made it very clear that they would vote to take no deal off the table, break a three-line Whip and, if necessary, either resign or be sacked from the Government. Will the Prime Minister confirm that indeed nothing has changed and that no deal remains firmly on the table?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady talks about a second referendum. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) would set a precedent. But there is a very easy solution to this: the Prime Minister could bring forward that Bill in Government time, as a Government Bill, and whip for it. My suspicion is that the Prime Minister is yet again leaving herself wriggle room on the issue of no deal. We have already voted against no deal in this House. She says she is going to allow us a vote on no deal, but then she says that no deal will still be on the table even if we do that. Will she confirm, yet again, that there will be no legal impediment to no deal at the end of this process? So what is this extension for?

The Prime Minister: What we have seen, of course, is that, yes, the House voted in the way the hon. Gentleman indicated, but we are now working with the European Union. We will bring changes agreed with the European Union back to this House for a further meaningful vote. Members of this House will then have the opportunity to determine whether they want to leave the European Union with a deal or not. Should they reject no deal, the further votes that I have given a commitment to will take place.

Mr Speaker: Mr Blunt, having heard you—it was rather unwelcome—from your seat, perhaps we can now hear you on your feet.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I rather suspect that given all the enthusiasm that Brenda of Bristol had for the last general election, the prospect of an extension of this debate for several months will be received with dismay by the country. However, underneath that dismay is massive uncertainty. There is a real price for extending this debate, and I urge my right hon. Friend to stick to her guns and make sure that there is a choice between her deal and leaving to World Trade Organisation terms. That is the choice that the European Union faces, which hopefully will bring it to end the backstop, and that is the choice that the Labour party should face as well.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that we can indeed bring an end to the uncertainty. We can do that. I believe that the best way to do that is through a meaningful vote in this House to support the deal that the Government will bring back from the European Union.
Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): We all know that no deal would be an absolute catastrophe on so many different levels. Does the Prime Minister acknowledge that her own deal will have a huge impact on the economy as well? Cutting immigration of EU nationals by 80% will be the ruination of many cities and towns across our country.

The Prime Minister: I say to the hon. Lady that we now have the opportunity, as a result of leaving the European Union, to put a new immigration system into place—yes, to bring an end to free movement once and for all; that was an important element of the referendum debate and the reason why, I think, quite a number of people voted to leave the European Union. We can now put in place an immigration system based not on where somebody comes from, but on the skills they have and the contribution they will make to this country.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) has perambulated from one part of the Chamber to another, but fortunately I can still see him. He is now next to the Father of the House—a very important position.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for that warm-hearted introduction.

There may be a special place in hell for those of us who want a clean break with the European Union, but does my right hon. Friend agree that there will be the devil to pay for any party that tries to hold a second referendum to reverse the result of the first one?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. Our party campaigned to respect the result of the referendum and the Labour party campaigned saying that it would respect the result of the referendum. It is important that we do just that.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): As we speak, the Prime Minister’s Government are preparing to apply tariffs to basic food items such as cheese and meat, the price of which will be paid by families in this country who have suffered enough. Is this really the Tory party price of which will be paid by families in this country.

The Prime Minister: Clearly, having no deal with our largest trading partner is deeply unattractive, which is why I have supported the deal. The Government position has been to leave with a deal, and the Conservative party manifesto was very clear that we wanted both a trade deal and a customs arrangement. If we do get to 12 March and, unfortunately, the deal is not accepted, will my right hon. Friend confirm that the Government’s position will remain that we want to secure a deal and that, if our negotiators need that little bit more time, the Government will not be whipping their Ministers to block the extension?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right in saying that the Government have been very clear throughout all this that we believe that the best route for the United Kingdom is to leave the European Union with a deal. That will continue to be this Government’s position. I want to work to ensure that the situation she refers to does not arise because we are able to get that agreement in the meaningful vote and get a deal agreed.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Can the Prime Minister explain how she intends to obviate the need for checks on rules of origin without accepting common external tariffs? Is it not the case that the only realistic way of meeting that commitment in the political declaration is to negotiate a new customs union with the EU?

The Prime Minister: We put forward proposals on how we could achieve that some months ago, and there will of course be a debate on the balance between alignment and checks when we come to the next stage of the negotiations.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): The withdrawal negotiations are nearing their final, most crucial and most delicate stages. Against that background, does my right hon. Friend not agree that talk from certain quarters of her Government of immediately extending the article 50 process and taking no deal off the table is simply giving succour to our interlocutors in Brussels, and, if anything, undermining the position of the British negotiators?

The Prime Minister: As I have said on a number of occasions, simply extending article 50 does not resolve the issue of the decision that the House will have to make. When the time comes, it will be for every Member of the House to decide whether we should respect the result of the referendum and whether we should do that by leaving with a deal, with the changes that will be achieved through the negotiations that are currently being undertaken with the European Union. However, that choice—no deal, a deal, or no Brexit—will be before every Member when the time comes.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): I always admire a good U-turn on either side of the House, and I am delighted to welcome the Prime Minister’s screeching U-turn today and her acceptance that the House must have a chance to vote against no deal; but can she be clear, because she has not been thus far? If we have that vote on 12 or 13 March, will her Government be voting in favour of no deal or against it?

The Prime Minister: I am hearing conflicting views from across the Chamber. On one hand I am told that nothing has changed, and on the other hand I am told that we have done a U-turn.
Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): The Prime Minister was told a long time ago that this would be the easiest deal in history, and that we would be in an implementation period and not a transition period. Given the importance of the future trade arrangements to this country, will she commit herself to ensuring that red lines are put before Parliament for Parliament’s democratically elected representatives to vote on, in relation to the future trade agreement? That is the way to ensure that the credibility of our democracy is not undermined.

The Prime Minister: Let me give my hon. Friend some reassurance. I have indicated on a number of occasions in the House that as we look to that next stage of the negotiations—which will indeed cover the trade relationship that we will have with the EU in the long term, but also other issues such as our security arrangements, and some underpinning issues such as the exchange of data—we will be seeking more involvement from Parliament, and my right hon. Friends the Brexit Secretary and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster are considering what form that interaction with Parliament should take in the future.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Greens): European leaders have made it pretty clear that they would only agree to an extension of article 50 for a good reason, not just to enable the Prime Minister to faff and dither and delay and do some more can-kicking down the road. That extension must be for a purpose. Will the Prime Minister therefore make another U-turn and support the proposal for a confirmatory public vote, which is now gaining support on both sides of the House?

The Prime Minister: I have made my views on this issue clear on a number of occasions in this Chamber. There are those who are talking about a confirmatory vote on the deal, and including on that ballot paper the option of remaining in the European Union.

Caroline Lucas: Yes.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady says yes to that. I have to say to her that it would not be respecting the result of the referendum, and that 80% of the votes cast in the last general election were for parties that said they would respect it.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the whole history of the European Union has shown that time and again, when there are intractable disputes, agreement is obtained, often late at night, with about an hour to go before the clock runs out? Will she therefore stick to her deadline, and will she impress on the European Union that there is a majority in the House for her agreement if the necessary changes to the backstop can be made?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for drawing attention to that issue in relation to the European Union. We are indeed in the process of those talks with the European Union, and have made clear to it that—as the vote in the House showed—there is support for a withdrawal agreement provided that we can see those necessary changes in relation to the backstop.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I feel so enraged this week by the complete and utter lack of bravery to do the right thing for our country. Perhaps it is because I have spent my week in my constituency, trying to put out the burning injustices that the Prime Minister’s Government have started where I live. I will not sit one more day and listen to the Prime Minister crow about employment going up, while where I live employment is falling and hunger is rising. I currently have one midwife—one!—for the entirety of my constituency. There are people in my constituency who are living in hotels, and who have to move out because Crufts is coming to Birmingham.

Will the Prime Minister do a brave thing and do, once, what is best for the country, not what is best for any of us? Will she be brave, and will she at least answer the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith)? Will she at least vote against no deal herself?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the passion with which the hon. Lady has made the point about her constituency, but time and again I am asked questions in the Chamber the implication of which is to try to deny the facts of the situation that are before us. The facts of the situation are very simple. The House will have a decision to make, but only three options will be before it: to leave the European Union with a deal, to leave without a deal, or to revoke article 50 and have no Brexit. I have made clear that the last of those options is one that I will not support, and I believe that the House should not support it, because it would be going back on the result of the referendum.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I do believe that the Prime Minister has shown some courage today, because there is some welcome pragmatism in what she has announced. She has acknowledged the fear that people have of time running out, and, like the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), the desperate need of the businesses in our constituencies to have certainty. Without a doubt that certainty can be provided by Parliament’s voting for her deal when she puts it forward, but given that it may not be carried, will she confirm that the UK will now only leave the EU without a deal if Parliament explicitly provides consent?

The Prime Minister: As I said in my statement, if we bring the meaningful vote back Parliament rejects that meaningful vote, we will table a motion to ask Parliament its view on whether or not we should be leaving without a withdrawal agreement and a future framework. On that basis, we would only leave without a deal with the consent of Parliament. But I echo the point that my right hon. Friend made at the beginning of her question: the best thing for Parliament to do is to vote for a deal, such that we can leave with a deal.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The first thing that South Wales police raised with me when I was elected in 2001 was the problem they were experiencing with obtaining up-to-date information from other police forces in Europe so that they could tackle paedophilia in the south Wales valleys. We have managed to achieve obtaining that over recent years, as I am sure the Prime Minister knows from her time as Home Secretary, but if we leave without a deal—as she rightly said in her first letter to
[Chris Bryant]

the European Union triggering article 50—we will not have a deal on security, and that means that the police, from the day afterwards, will not have access to that information. How are we going to make sure that we are safe if we proceed down the no-deal path?

The Prime Minister: Let me say first to the hon. Gentleman that I do indeed recognise the issue that he has raised. One of the early things that I did when I became Home Secretary was agree that the United Kingdom should be part of the European Investigation Order. I stood at this Dispatch Box while the hon. Gentleman’s right hon. and hon. Friends tried to prevent me from ensuring that we could keep measures such as the European arrest warrant.

Let me also say to the hon. Gentleman, however, that I believe that leaving with a deal is the right thing to be done for this country, for a variety of reasons. Most people focus on the trade and customs issues, but the no-deal issues are just as important. That is why obviously in no-deal preparations we work with others across the European Union to see what arrangements can be in place in a no-deal, but it is also why the deal we have negotiated is the best thing to happen, because it allows us access to key areas such as the passenger name records and Prüm.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend please confirm whether over the last fortnight in conversations with EU members she has heard anything to suggest that any EU country would fail to give us an extension to article 50, and if that is the case what those reasons might be?

The Prime Minister: I have not been discussing with individual member states an extension to article 50; what I have been discussing with them is what the UK Parliament requires—what this House requires—in order to get the change that would secure a majority in this House for the withdrawal agreement. However, the point is very simple: were it to be the case that an extension of article 50 were requested by the UK, that would require the unanimous consent of all 27 members of the European Union. I have not had that discussion with them.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister will remember that I started off feeling sympathetic to her, especially when she began saying that she wanted to talk to people, and then I felt rather sorry for her. But I have to tell her on behalf of my constituents and myself that I feel very frightened by what she has said today. I believe that the Prime Minister has lost her sense of direction and lost the real message that every Prime Minister should have in mind. Forget about referendums—I think of Mussolini when I think of referendums. The responsibility of the Prime Minister is the national interest and the health, welfare and prosperity of the people we all represent. Will she remind herself of that, face down the people on her Back Benches, and do something that delivers to this House? There is a two thirds majority for a sensible conclusion; let us bring those on all the Benches together and discuss this. Two thirds of the Members in this House want a sensible solution.

The Prime Minister: I am thinking precisely of the national interest when I sit down with the European Commission and other European Union leaders with a view to negotiating changes to the withdrawal agreement and the package we agreed, such that we can bring that back to this House and get agreement for a deal.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): So that I can prepare to realign myself to the metaphysical plane: what is my right hon. Friend’s estimate of the possibility of our leaving on time?

The Prime Minister: It is my estimation that it is within our grasp to get changes such that we can bring a deal back to this House to enable this House to confirm in a meaningful vote its intention to leave the European Union with a deal on 29 March.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): For 22 years I have served the constituents of Don Valley, and I have dealt with many constituents and their plights. At no time in those 22 years have they looked to the EU to supply the answers to the injustices they have faced, whether in terms of poverty or housing or having a decent education or health service; a Labour Government supply the answers to those issues. That is why it is so important to recognise that in this House there are people on the remain and the leave side for whom no deal will ever be good enough. The time has come to recognise, as is said in the first line of the first leaflet of the 2017 election from Labour, that the decision to leave has been made by the British people. We said in the relevant chapter of our manifesto that we are here to negotiate Brexit, not stop it. Does the Prime Minister agree that she needs to show compromise, but so does everybody else in this House?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree. Compromise is necessary of course and we have seen compromise already in relation to the deal that has been negotiated, but the right hon. Lady is absolutely right to point out, as I referenced earlier, that 80% of the votes at the last general election were cast for parties that were clear in their manifestos that we would respect the result of the referendum, and we should be doing just that. I believe the best way to do that is to leave the European Union with a deal, and I intend to bring a deal back to this House of Commons that I would hope and expect the House can support.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Is it not still the reality that the withdrawal agreement—warts and all, amended or not—remains the only serious show in town if we are to leave the EU, and does the Prime Minister think that if this deal keeps getting voted down by this House she will need to stand alongside the Leader of the Opposition, go on television and explain and level with the British public why this House is institutionally and politically incapable of delivering Brexit?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that we are seeking changes to the withdrawal agreement, but the bulk of it remains the same. It is about intricate issues such as the legal aspects for those businesses that have contracts with the European Union after we leave the European Union, and citizens’ rights
and ensuring the guarantees and protections for citizens’ rights. He says that in the event that this House did not vote for a deal, I should stand by the Leader of the Opposition and explain why this House had not voted for a deal; that might be a little difficult because, given his new policy, the Leader of the Opposition does not seem to want to deliver Brexit.

**Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The Prime Minister’s language, borrowed from the extremists, in describing the Bill from my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) as commandeering the House is totally irresponsible. Does the Prime Minister not understand that this is a parliamentary democracy, that we own the Standing Orders and that we can vote to change them either permanently or temporarily at any time?

**The Prime Minister**: Of course it is absolutely right that the Standing Orders of this House can be changed by this House; in recent times the Standing Orders of this House have often been interpreted in ways that were not expected.

**Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): The vast majority of my constituents in Gloucester would echo every word the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) said; they voted and the country voted to leave and we in our manifestos chose to respect the result of that referendum. So there is no question about us leaving; the only issue at stake, and the only issue my constituents worry about, is the inability of this House to get behind the Prime Minister and resolve the withdrawal agreement Bill. Given that business, and particularly manufacturing, is hurting and will hurt with every day going forward, will my right hon. Friend confirm that if she can agree with the European Union the changes she is rightly looking for before 12 March, she will come back to this House earlier and put the question as soon as possible?

**The Prime Minister**: I thank my hon. Friend for the point he makes; he is absolutely right that the vast majority of members of the public want to see this House delivering leaving the European Union and doing so in the best way for this country, and we will be working to ensure we get those changes as soon as possible. When I said there will be a vote by 12 March, I meant that that is the last date for a vote, and if it is possible to bring it earlier I will do so.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Listening to this mess it is no wonder that in Scotland the EU is more popular than the UK. The only sovereign decision this Parliament can take is to revoke article 50, to prevent leaving without a deal. An extension to article 50 means the Prime Minister has to beg the EU27 and put the UK at the mercy of the kindness of the EU27. Does she not agree that revoking article 50 is better than leaving without a deal, which is the current trajectory for the UK given the letter she wrote on 29 March 2017?

**The Prime Minister**: I do not agree that revoking article 50 is a better route for this country. Members across this House gave people in the country the opportunity to decide whether to leave the European Union or not; they voted to leave the EU and I believe it is imperative that we respect that vote and deliver on that vote.

**Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): When the Prime Minister brings her deal back to the House of Commons I will vote for it the second time; as the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) has said, it is time and we need to support the deal. If the deal, however, does not succeed in the House, will the Prime Minister then give the House the option of voting for Britain joining the European free trade area—Common Market 2.0, the Norway option—which commands support from across the House and from some Eurosceptics such as Daniel Hannan?

**The Prime Minister**: I thank my right hon. Friend. Friend for the commitment that he has given in relation to the meaningful vote. I think he is trying to step forward to a stage beyond, when we have taken those other votes through this House. As I say, the first aim of the Government, and my first aim, is to bring back a meaningful vote that can command support across the House, such that we are able to leave with a deal. I believe that the arrangements within the political declaration have significant benefits in relation to issues such as customs and also provide for us to have an independent trade policy and no free movement. Those are important elements of what people voted for in 2016.

**Liz Kendall** (Leicester West) (Lab): I am glad the Prime Minister has finally recognised that if she cannot get her agreement through, we will need to extend article 50 to avoid the risk and disruption of no deal on 29 March, but like many others, I fear that we will just end up here again at the end of any extension, however long it might be, because the Prime Minister will not change course. She keeps talking about the facts, but there are different facts out there, if only she would open her eyes. Is it not the truth that she could get her agreement through if she changed her red lines and worked across the House, or if she had the courage of her convictions and put her withdrawal agreement back to the public? That is the way to break the Brexit deadlock.

**The Prime Minister**: The hon. Lady knows my answer in relation to putting the deal back to the public. I believe it is our job to respect the result of the referendum and to deliver on that. There are those who wish to put that deal back to the public against a no deal, and those who wish to put it back to the public against remaining in the European Union. I think that remaining in the European Union is not the right course for us to take. We should be leaving the European Union, and the best way to do that is with a deal.

**George Freeman** (Mid Norfolk) (Con): Public trust in this institution is low and falling. I welcome the Prime Minister’s statement that she, this Government and this party will honour the referendum result. She, like me, campaigned for remain, and we are equally committed to getting a deal. I beg colleagues who do not think that this deal is perfect to vote for it so that we can move on and deliver what the British people asked for. In the event that the House rejects the Prime Minister’s deal again, which I hope it does not, and rejects no deal, can
we use the extension period to reach across the House—in the spirit of what the right hon. Member for Don Valley has said—and look at EFTA instead of the backstop, and at other variations? We need to deliver a Brexit in the national interest, not party interest.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to say that we are working to deliver a deal in the national interest. We have reached across the House, although we have so far had limited discussions with those on the official Opposition Front Bench. We are happy to continue those discussions with the Opposition Front Bench, but we have also been talking to Members from across the House. It is important that we get a deal that the House is able to support, and the stronger the support across the House, the better that will be.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister can surely not be unaware of the fear out there in the country about what no deal means. Surely her constituency surgeries, like mine, are full of people who cannot sleep at night for worrying about their businesses and their jobs and because of the fear of no deal. She has told us today that in the event of her deal being rejected again by this House, there will be a vote on 13 March to take no deal off the table. I will vote to take no deal off the table. She has been asked several times today about this, and she has lectured us all about personal responsibility, so how will the Prime Minister herself vote in those circumstances? If the House votes down her deal and she brings forward that motion, how will she vote? It is not just MPs who deserve an answer; it is the public.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady misses out a stage. There is a stage before we get to that point, which is the vote in this House on the meaningful vote and the deal, and I can assure her that I will be voting for a deal.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): May I gently remind the Prime Minister that we trade on World Trade Organisation terms with the rest of the world outside the EU and that we do so very profitably? She should not be deflected. Colleagues knew what they were voting for when triggering article 50. A concern must be that, at this crucial stage of the negotiations with the EU, the Prime Minister’s next steps will now make a good deal less likely, because the EU will hope that Parliament will defeat no deal and extend article 50. When I voted against the Iraq war, I knew that I had to resign to do so. Has the time not come to face down those Ministers who have threatened to resign, in order to ensure that we achieve the best possible chance of a good deal?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend that we need to achieve the best possible chance of a good deal. Actually, we trade with other parts of the world on terms that are part of the EU’s trade agreements with those other parts of the world, and we have been working to ensure that those would continue in the event of no deal, should there be no deal. I think that the Prime Minister for coming to the House yet again to update us on the European Union. She has been tireless in keeping the House informed, and her ability to keep going and trying to get a deal is welcomed across the House. I do hope that she will be able to come back with a deal that the whole House can vote for. However, if that is not the case, she has said 108 times that we will leave the European Union on 29 March, and if that is not possible, does she not think that the country will regard that as a betrayal?

The Prime Minister: What the country wants is to see us delivering on Brexit and delivering leaving the European Union. The timetable of 29 March was set and accepted by the House when it accepted the vote on article 50. As I have said, I want us to be able to do that and to leave on the basis of a deal, and we will be continuing to work to ensure that we can do that. The important issue that Members must consider when they come to vote on the next meaningful vote is delivering on Brexit and giving the public the reassurance that we are actually going to do what they asked us to do.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): What would be the better democratic outcome for the country: accepting a second-rate deal resulting in a second-rate future, or having a second public vote asking the public whether they support or reject a second-rate future for their children and grandchildren?

The Prime Minister: I think the best thing for the democratic health of this country is to deliver on the referendum result of 2016. As the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) has pointed out, people from across the House have campaigned on a manifesto to respect the referendum and deliver on Brexit. And the deal before the House is not a second-rate deal; it is a good deal for the UK.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): It is encouraging to hear from my right hon. Friend that, in her words, good progress has been made towards securing an alternative to the vexed issue of the backstop, but it is critical that hon. and right hon. Members have the opportunity to consider such new arrangements in advance of any vote. Is she confident that we will indeed have that opportunity in advance of the vote on 12 March?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the concern that Members will have. Of course, the bulk of the proposals that will be put back would be the withdrawal agreement
and the political declaration, which have already been considered by the House, but I am clear that Members will need to have an opportunity to look at any changes that have been made and to consider them before they vote in the House.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): The Prime Minister has been forced to admit today for the first time that we do not have to leave without a deal on 29 March unless Parliament explicitly approves it. However, there is little point in applying for a two-month or three-month extension simply to carry on the same circular discussions with the same parliamentary gridlock. If we are to apply for an extension of the article 50 period, would it not be better, rather than specifying a time, to secure an extension for a purpose, which should be clarity on our future relationship with the EU? The lack of clarity is not down to the national interest, but because it is in the Conservative party’s interest not to have to face up to the fundamental choices posed by Brexit.

The Prime Minister: No. We have considerable detail in the political declaration—more than many people thought it would be possible to achieve at this stage. It is not possible to have a legal text, but the EU cannot agree legal texts with us until we are outside the EU. People are focusing on an issue at the heart of the future negotiations, which is the question of the balance between alignment with rules on goods and agricultural products and checks at the border. The spectrum is identified in the political declaration, because the UK Government’s clear position is that we are aiming for and want to work towards frictionless trade, and the EU is concerned about the impact of that on the single market. It is that discussion between the UK and the EU that is at the heart of the political declaration.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): In seeking to limit us either to an agreement that ties us to the EU without a clear end, an extension of this corrosive period of limbo, or a second public vote, does the Prime Minister share my profound democratic concern that Members of this House are contriving to deny those whom we serve any option that honours the referendum result?

The Prime Minister: As I have said on many occasions, I am clear that we should hon our the result of the referendum. I believe that the deal we put before the House, which was rejected by the House, did that. The deal that we will bring back will reflect the work that we have done with the European Union in response to concerns that have been raised by this House. I expect and hope that I will be able to bring back a deal that Members across this House will see is the best way for us to leave the European Union.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): From what the Prime Minister says, I understand that from her point of view the backstop is the crux of the matter. She stated: “We discussed the legal changes that are required to guarantee that the Northern Ireland backstop cannot endure indefinitely” but then she stopped, so what progress has been made to date in relation to those legal changes?

The Prime Minister: As I have said, we are in discussions about the legal changes. The hon. Lady says that it appears from listening to me that the issue is the backstop. Actually, this House made it clear that the issue was the backstop, because that is how this House voted on the 29 January.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): First it was a people’s vote, and now it is a confirmatory vote. Are not hon. Members using these euphemisms because, in reality, their proposal is for a second referendum and, by definition, they are dishonouring the result of the first? Will the Prime Minister accept that many of us who fought hard for remain nevertheless accepted the result that the British people had given us and wished to implement that result? We have no admiration whatsoever for hon. Members who campaigned for the referendum, who stood on a manifesto to implement the result, who supported the referendum decision in a vote, who voted to trigger article 50 less than two years ago, and who now are in plain sight reneging on those promises.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Whether it is called a people’s vote or a confirmatory vote, it is a second referendum. It is putting the decision back to the British people. We said that we would honour the decision, the Labour party stood on a manifesto of respecting that decision, and we should both do just that.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The Prime Minister says that she wants to unite the nation and this House, and she has again presented us today with her deal, no deal or no Brexit. Her deal faced the biggest ever defeat in this place, and no amount of backstop tinkering is going to change things for us on the Opposition Benches. Given that no deal has already been rejected twice by this House, what contingency planning she has done for no Brexit in the same way as for no deal, the assessment of which she is publishing today? If she will not rescind article 50, will she not accept that, ostensibly, the only sensible thing to do with 800 hours to go is to put her negotiated settlement back to the people, so that we can get a fresh assessment of the will of the people—the most accurate one—and then that can prevail?

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

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): I encourage the Prime Minister to continue her discussions with our European friends. May I gently warn the House against prejudging the outcome of those discussions, which I have heard decried across this place during these exchanges? Whatever happens over the next few days, weeks and hopefully not months, I know she will agree that holding a second referendum would be an affront to the people of Basildon and Thurrock, who knew full well what they were doing, and 73% of whom voted to leave.

The Prime Minister: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right that we should honour the referendum result. We stood on a manifesto to do that, and other Members of this House stood on a manifesto to respect the referendum, and we should deliver Brexit.
Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I hope the Prime Minister will forgive me when I say that every time she makes a promise from that Dispatch Box it is met with cynicism among the Opposition because of the number of promises she has broken and the number of votes in this House that she has decided not to take forward. That has been emphasised further today by her failure to answer a simple question: when the Division bell rings in this House to prevent no deal, will she vote for or against?

The Prime Minister: As I have said to other hon. Members and to others outside this House, one of the frustrations in this debate is the way in which people will not focus on the immediate issue before us. The immediate issue before us is negotiating changes to the withdrawal agreement and to the package that was agreed with the European Union in November, such that we can take a vote and leave the European Union on 29 March with a deal. I hope they will also take some reassurance from the fact that if this House again votes to reject that deal, the Prime Minister is having constructive talks with the EU.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Yesterday, I was contacted by an engineer working for a laser manufacturer in Rugby involved in highly competitive export markets. As 29 March gets closer, he is very concerned about the viability of his company and the future of 100 jobs as a consequence of tariffs and delays that would be involved in no deal. How will the Prime Minister’s statement today set my constituents’ minds at rest?

The Prime Minister: I hope that my hon. Friend’s constituents will take some reassurance from the fact that the Government are having constructive talks with the European Union and making progress in relation to the changes that this House has required to the withdrawal agreement and to the package that was agreed with the European Union in November, such that we can take a vote and leave the European Union on 29 March with a deal. I hope they will also take some reassurance from the fact that if this House again votes to reject that deal, we have set out the steps that would be taken in relation to further votes on no deal and on an extension to article 50.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): With every answer that the Prime Minister gives from the Dispatch Box, there is a collective sinking of hearts in the country, because she seems to engage in nothing but wishful thinking, and the country is fed up with watching its Prime Minister chase unicorns. Will she please confirm in what specific circumstances she believes, or has been told, that this one-off extension to article 50 will be granted by the EU? What specifically would she use that time to achieve?

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier, I have not discussed an extension of article 50 with other leaders around the European Union table. However, the European Union—in the form of the EU Council and the European Commission—has made it clear that it would expect any extension to be on the basis of a clear agreement that there was a plan for achieving the deal. I want to ensure that we can achieve the deal before we get to that point, and if the hon. Lady is worried about uncertainty in the House, it is very simple: vote for the deal.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I voted remain in the referendum but, just like the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint), I completely accept the result and the fact that I stood on a manifesto committing me to implement it, but the official Opposition have dishonoured their own manifesto with the U-turn that they announced yesterday. Despite its imperfections, I also accept that the currently proposed withdrawal agreement is the best way we have of implementing the referendum result, so the Prime Minister can expect my support in the Division on 12 March. However, if that is not successful, an extension strikes me as unlikely to lead to any change. Given that we have ruled out a referendum, the only remaining way of honouring the referendum result is to make a transition to WTO terms. Should the House not confront that choice now and be prepared to make that decision?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for the commitment he has given. I say to him, as I have said to others, that it is the case that, when we come to look at the changed withdrawal agreement, it will be necessary for every Member of this House to ask themselves whether they want to honour the result of the referendum and, in honouring the result of the referendum, whether they wish to do so by leaving with a deal. That will be the opportunity available to Members of this House when we bring back a meaningful vote and I hope that Members on both sides of the House will vote for a deal, to leave and to honour the referendum.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Ind): The Prime Minister knows that the public are sick and tired of this impasse, born of politicians always putting their party political interests above the national interest. May I ask her not to belittle the genuine, heartfelt concern that many hon. Members have about the real lives, the real jobs and the real livelihoods that are at stake in a botched Brexit? That cannot just be swept under the carpet, and we should not just turn a blind eye. If we want to break through this gridlock, let us give the public a chance by having a people’s vote now.

The Prime Minister: I recognise the uncertainty and the impact of that uncertainty on businesses and on people. The clear message I get when I speak to members of the public—I was out on the doorsteps again at the weekend—is that they want to see this resolved and that they want Parliament to get on with the job of voting for a deal and ensuring that we can leave the European Union. The hon. Gentleman knows my answer in relation to a people’s vote, but were we to go for a people’s vote, it would simply extend the uncertainty for a further period of time.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): I welcome the fact that, contrary to certain less than well informed opinions in this House, even among my right hon. Friend’s Cabinet and junior Ministers, significant preparations have been undertaken by the EU, UK and Ireland for any eventuality. We now know, for instance, that aviation, financial derivatives, euro clearing, aerospace manufacturing, auto making, agriculture and other sectors of our economy will have access to the EU, that electricity interconnectors will be licensed, that UK insurance and reinsurance will be licensed, that the UK will have continued to border efficiency are suggested by my work with
customs and freight operators that my right hon. Friend now has in her hands to implement in the national interest. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Be more lively, man.

Mr Fysh: Will my right hon. Friend, first, authorise intermediaries to have access to transitional simplified procedures? Secondly, will she allow them to be authorised consignees for the purpose of the transit system? Thirdly, will she instruct the Treasury to help underwrite a scheme that allows responsible intermediaries to guarantee liabilities to customs authorities within the transit system? [Interruption.] This way they can shoulder much of the responsibility for customs away from the border—

Mr Speaker: Order. Resume your seat, Mr Fysh. [Interruption.] Order. I indulged the hon. Gentleman, whose sincerity I greatly admire, but may I very politely suggest that he needs to develop some feel, some antennae, for the House? The House’s fascination with his points is not as great as his own.

The Prime Minister: First, the issues to which my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr Fysh) refers—the measures indicated by the European Union—would only be there for a temporary and limited period. Secondly, he gives a long list of various issues in relation to the alternative arrangements at the border, some of which are precisely the issues that the European Union has raised a question over in relation to the derogations from EU law that would be required.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The consequence of that question is that people are now gesticulating at me to indicate that they are going to ask very short questions. A bit of sign language is being deployed.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Brexit costs a lot, both in political energy and in diversion away from the issues that constituents raise about the NHS, schools and so on, but what has been the cost of Brexit, in pounds and pence, from when Mr Cameron announced the referendum to today?

The Prime Minister: The amount of money that the Government have set aside in relation to the work we are doing on preparedness for Brexit, for a deal and for no deal, has been clear and has been published. The Treasury has published the allocation of money to individual Departments.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): Mr Speaker, you will be delighted to know that I do not have a list. As my right hon. Friend is probably aware, more than 70% of the residents of Clacton voted to leave the EU. I, too, have been on the doorsteps, and I, too, have been getting a lot of mail. My residents do not want an extension to article 50, and they do not want a second divisive, and possibly destructive, referendum. Does she agree with President Juncker that it takes two to tango and that it is time the EU learned to dance?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that a second referendum would be divisive and that we must honour the result of the first referendum. I think what President Juncker said is that it takes two to tango and that he is rather good at dancing.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) invariably has a sunny disposition, so it is always a pleasure to call him.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I am very grateful, Mr Speaker. I know the Prime Minister has talked about addressing the things immediately before us first, but can she put her mind to the fact that the spring statement is due on 13 March? How will today’s statement affect that?

The Prime Minister: The spring statement will still go ahead.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement, which bears the welcome hallmarks of British pragmatism and common sense, and I will continue to vote for her deal. She will be aware that 29 March is cast in statute law. Can she assure me and the House that, in the hopefully unlikely circumstance that we need to extend article 50, she will find Government time to ensure that we can vote on it in a proper and meaningful way?

The Prime Minister: I give my hon. Friend the reassurance he seeks that if the House rejects the meaningful vote and then votes not to leave with no deal, and then votes for a short, limited extension, we will bring forward the legislation necessary to put that in place.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): The Prime Minister has described her discussions with the EU as constructive. I wanted to ask what sympathy there has been in those discussions for a short extension to article 50, but she has already made it clear that she cannot answer that question because she has not had any such discussions, so when is she going to start them? At the moment, she has absurdly and irresponsibly outlined a course of action with no knowledge of whether it will be acceptable to the European Union. She therefore cannot bring the motion. If she did, and if the House went for it and the European Union said no, where would it leave us in the two weeks that would be left before 29 March?

The Prime Minister: If we were in a position where we wanted to extend article 50, it would be necessary to get the agreement of the European Union to do that. Time and again, I am asked to listen to the views of this Parliament. What I have set out in my statement is that if we were in that circumstance, a motion would be brought forward and it would be for this House to decide whether it wished to ask for an extension to article 50, and that decision would then be taken to the European Union.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I must admit to being somewhat confused following the statement, so can the Prime Minister confirm that when we vote against the deal on 12 March, as we undoubtedly will, it leads to a vote on no deal on 13 March, and that when we vote against no deal again on 13 March it leads to a vote on extending article 50 on 14 March and, if we vote for extending article 50 on 14 March, that leads to no deal coming back on the
table for the duration of the extended negotiations? Is this not the political equivalent of swimming round in circles?

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the timetable I set out in my statement. I am working to bring back a deal that this House is able to agree.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister announced today that she will start the process of extending article 50 on 14 March. However, it is a two-way process. If the European Union partners are unable to deliver in 11 working days, will she revoke article 50 to stop a no deal?

The Prime Minister: Revoking article 50 is not something that can be done for a limited period of time. It means staying in the European Union, and we will not do that. We will honour the result of the referendum.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Prime Minister’s argument goes, “We are leaving the EU because 17.4 million people voted for it.” Let’s face it, her passionate rejection of putting her deal in front of the people again is because 17.4 million people voted for “something”. Can she tell us roughly how many of the 17.4 million people voted for her deal and how many, like the protesters outside, voted for leaving without a deal?

The Prime Minister: Let me say to the hon. Lady that 17.4 million people voted to leave the EU and that is what we will do.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): On a scale of one to 10, where one is low and 10 is high, how likely is it that the Prime Minister will get any meaningful changes to her withdrawal agreement?

The Prime Minister: I do not operate on those terms. What I operate on is going out there and working hard to get the changes that can be brought back to this House to get a deal.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The Prime Minister has so far been rather slippery and spun her way out of answering a direct question that has been put by many Members across this House, so it begs to be asked again: when this House votes on taking no deal off the table, will she and her Government vote for or against that? Yes or no, straight question.

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I have given earlier.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister will surely recognise that the economic uncertainty around Brexit, which is motivating many businesses, particularly those trading in services, to disinvest in part from the UK, is related not only to the events—or not—that are approaching in terms of 29 March, but to the nature of the future trade deal that Britain negotiates with the EU. Given that there is no certainty that Britain will be able to negotiate that trade deal by the end of the transition period coming up, should we not extend article 50 for longer than the three months she has suggested to allow more time for those meaningful future trade negotiations at least to get started properly?

The Prime Minister: The detail of that trade deal for the future and the future economic and security partnership cannot start to be discussed until we are a third country: it cannot start until after we have left the EU. So extending article 50 does not enable those detailed legal discussions to take place; it merely means that they would be further delayed. [ Interruption. ] It is true.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): What happens if the House votes against extending article 50 on 14 March? We would find ourselves having voted to leave on 29 March on the Thursday, but not being able to leave with a deal because we voted against it on the Tuesday and not being able to leave without a deal because we voted against that on the Wednesday. If we have to leave and we cannot leave with a deal and we cannot leave without one, what happens after that? Is it significant that the day after that is the Ides of March?

The Prime Minister: I say to the hon. Gentleman that this House will have decisions to take and it will have to look at the consequences of those decisions, but the easy way to ensure that he is not in the position that he sets out is to vote for the deal when we bring the meaningful vote back.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister seems incapable of thinking more than one move ahead. Clearly, she is more of a draughts player than a chess player. Let me spell out the issues here: the Prime Minister’s deal has already been defeated and the House has already rejected leaving on no-deal terms. I do not see that situation changing in the next few days, so in all probability the House will vote to extend article 50. But what will the Prime Minister do, because the 27 EU states have said that they will agree to an extension only on the basis of a general election or a referendum of some description. What will the Prime Minister’s negotiating basis be? What will she do if one of the EU27 happens to scupper this by vetoing it?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has layered assumption on assumption and on assumption in his question. The first stage is for us to ensure that we can bring back a deal from the European Union with the changes that this House has required such that this House will support it and we can leave on 29 March with a deal.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Ind): In her remarks at the very beginning, the Prime Minister said: “The very credibility of our democracy is at stake.” I agree with her, because this House voted against leaving the EU with no deal and yet this Conservative Government have not abided, in their approach, with the decision of this parliamentary democracy. So democracy is being treated with contempt by an overbearing Government. Is it not the fact that there is a conspiracy between an incompetent Conservative Government and an incompetent Labour leadership to facilitate Brexit, against the needs, interests and wishes of the majority of people in this country?
The Prime Minister: First, this House voted on 29 January that it would support leaving the EU with a withdrawal agreement, provided there were changes to the backstop. It voted to support no hard border in Northern Ireland and leaving with a deal. Secondly, it is incumbent on all of us to ensure that we do deliver on Brexit. I am sure the hon. Gentleman stood on a manifesto to respect the result of the referendum. I stood on a manifesto to respect the result of the referendum and that is what I am doing.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): The Prime Minister has always said that she would not extend article 50, but I welcome the fact that she is now saying that she may get to the stage where she will extend it—I hope she would get there a lot sooner. On what grounds will she be seeking to extend it? What would she be seeking to achieve?

The Prime Minister: As I made clear earlier, I do not want to see us extending article 50. I want to see us getting a deal agreed and through this House, such that we can leave on 29 March with a deal. It will be up to this House to determine, in a vote, whether or not it wishes to extend article 50 if that meaningful vote is rejected.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): For the record, and this will not be a surprise to anybody, let me say that I will not, shall not and cannot vote for a second referendum, regardless of how much lipstick is put on it in what it is called. I think that in their heart of hearts both the Front Benchers from my party and the Government know that a majority does not exist in this House for a second referendum. That is a distraction from the main purpose of our job, which is to find a deal. I have spoken to the Prime Minister about workers’ rights, funding for our towns post Brexit and what we need to do to find a way through this. Some of my colleagues have labelled those things as bribes, but they are wrong; what we are trying to do is find a constructive way forward. So in the spirit of that constructive dialogue, the Leader of the Opposition wrote to the Prime Minister to set out changes to the political declaration—not the withdrawal agreement—that would make the deal acceptable to the Labour party. May I ask the Prime Minister to seriously consider and reflect upon those, because the only way she will get a majority in this House and the majority to implement the legislation going forward is if there is a deal that is supported by the sensible mainstream bulk of both parties?

The Prime Minister: First, on the issue of funding for towns around this country, when I stood on the doorstep of No. 10 when I first became Prime Minister I was clear that I wanted a country that works for everyone. What the hon. Gentleman has referred to fits right into that desire and policy of ensuring that we are responding to the needs of people across the whole country. On the other question he has raised, the Leader of the Opposition did write to me with a number of issues and I have responded to that in writing, because a number of points he has made are actually already reflected in the political declaration. There are a number of other issues where we have taken this forward, for example, as I said today, in relation to workers’ rights. My team have been able to have one further meeting with the Labour Front-Bench team and we are happy to have further meetings with them should they be willing to have them.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Highlands and Islands Enterprise carried out a survey of businesses and firms in the highlands and islands and found that 70% of those businesses see Brexit as a significant risk for their future. More worryingly, only some 13% of these firms see themselves as being adequately prepared for Brexit. Two weeks ago, the Prime Minister gave me a helpful answer on the shared prosperity fund. I wonder whether, in the same spirit, she would consider asking Ministers or appropriate officials to meet me, representatives of HIE and business representatives from the far north of Scotland to discuss the issue and identify the best way forward.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The Business Secretary has indicated that he or a Minister in his Department would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Mr Speaker, you will know that there is a Bill on the Order Paper today, with a Second Reading due on 13 March, to give the public a vote on the deal or the option of staying in the EU should they refuse it. Does the Prime Minister agree that, contrary to what she said before, this is not going back on the result of the referendum, but going forward, because it is asking people who voted leave in good faith whether what is being delivered is a reasonable representation of that? For example, Honda workers did not vote to leave their jobs when they voted to leave. Given that she has changed her mind on the article 50 deferral, will she not give the British people the right to change their mind in the light of the facts and give them a final vote on the deal?

The Prime Minister: Honda made it very clear that its announcement was related to changes in the global car market and not to the issue of Brexit. I have answered the question on a vote. It is so important that we actually deliver on the result of the referendum and that we do not go back to the people and ask them to think again, which is what the hon. Gentleman is suggesting.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): If this process was at all “simples”, it would be comparethesinglemarket.com, whereas the Prime Minister seems to be very much stuck in confused.com territory. For us to get a majority in this House behind any kind of deal, the Prime Minister is going to have to decide fundamentally who she wants to negotiate with. There will not be a deal that will satisfy her hardliners in the European Research Group and the majority of MPs in this House. Those two views are just not compatible, so please, put the country ahead of party interest and find a deal that can command the majority of support in this House.

The Prime Minister: I know who I am negotiating with: the deal will be negotiated between the UK Government and the European Union. This House made clear on 29 January the basis on which it was willing to accept a deal.
Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The Prime Minister again mentioned workers’ rights in her statement, yet the explanatory notes on the four statutory instruments that have been in Committee so far acknowledge that those statutory instruments do indeed weaken workers’ and employment protections. Does that not show that the Government’s promises on workers’ rights are entirely hollow, that the best way to protect workers’ rights is to remain in the European Union, and that demands for a second vote are entirely valid and legitimate?

The Prime Minister: The commitments I gave and references I made in my statement in relation to workers’ rights are of course looking to what we would do in the situation where we have left the European Union. We want to continue to enhance workers’ rights. As a Government we are already enhancing workers’ rights—for example, through the work we have done with the Taylor review and the response to the Taylor report. The Government have a commitment to enhance workers’ rights. The commitment that I have given is for those who are concerned that the European Union might in future take steps forward in relation to workers’ rights and, if we were not a member of the European Union, we would not automatically be responding to that. What I have said is that when standards change in the European Union, we would ensure that Parliament would have a vote on whether this United Kingdom would follow that or not.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Ind): This House has already voted against no deal and it has already voted against the Prime Minister’s agreement. The process outlined today is indicative of the Prime Minister’s shocking inability to take the very difficult decision that has to be taken, which is simply that the best way to serve the national interest is to accept that in the end the only way to get her deal over the line is to offer in return a confirmative public vote. That is the only way in which this House will accept her deal. The offer is on the table—will she accept it?

The Prime Minister: I responded to the issue of a confirmatory vote, second referendum or people’s vote earlier in response to a number of other questions. I respect the way in which the hon. Lady has been a campaigner for this issue and has been consistent in that, but the best way to ensure that we get a deal through this House is to do what we are doing, which is working with the European Union to find the changes that this House indicated were such that with them it would be willing to support a deal.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Last week, the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee released a report, backed unanimously by its members, on the issue of disinformation, particularly in relation to electoral campaigns. Given the release of that report and the questions that surround the leave campaigns, some of which amount to fraud on an industrial scale, before she proceeds any further, why has the Prime Minister not set up a judge-led public inquiry with the power to summon evidence and witnesses, to determine whether she is proceeding on the basis of a fraudulent campaign and a fraudulent result?

The Prime Minister: When people came to vote in the 2016 referendum, the British people knew what they were voting on, and 17.4 million of them voted to leave the European Union. We should respect that vote.
National Health Service (Prohibition of Fax Machines and Pagers)

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

2.45 pm

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to prohibit the use of fax machines and pagers by National Health Service bodies; and for connected purposes.

The NHS is our most valued public service. It has been there for me and my family and, like everyone in this House, I am determined to ensure its continued success. Last year’s celebrations to mark the NHS’s 70th anniversary highlighted some of the many breakthroughs achieved by scientists and doctors working for our NHS—breakthroughs such as proving the link between smoking and lung cancer, delivering the first in vitro fertilisation baby, and carrying out the world’s first liver, heart and lung transplant. Those are just a few of the remarkable breakthroughs that have revolutionised healthcare, allowing us to live longer, healthier lives.

Just as groundbreaking as some of the health service’s early achievements are those that we are seeing today, as a new wave of technological innovation transforms the way that healthcare is delivered. These new breakthroughs are fuelled by artificial intelligence, big data, robotics, wearable devices and personalised medicine. By harnessing these fourth industrial revolution innovations and embracing new digital tools, we can turbo-charge our fight against cancer, heart disease, dementia and many other illnesses. That aim is echoed in the Government’s NHS long-term plan, which commits all NHS providers to achieving a core level of digitisation by 2024.

A digital-first NHS is something for which I have campaigned and which I included as a key recommendation in the report that I wrote on NHS technology with the Centre for Policy Studies last year. A digital-first NHS will mean seamless interactions between GPs, hospitals and community care. It will also mean patients not having to wait for appointments to be confirmed in the post and an end to paper records being lost. At its most cutting-edge, the key product of digitisation is personalised medicine, which takes into account a patient’s genetic profile and which will become a staple in the doctors’ toolbox. The future of healthcare is exciting and means that we must upgrade the NHS and its technology for the smartphone era.

Holding back the NHS from achieving that goal is an over-reliance, in some areas, on outdated technology. Equipment such as pagers and fax machines are a barrier to the NHS achieving its full potential as a truly digital health service. That is why I am introducing this Bill to ensure that NHS trusts, quangos and related organisations phase out fax machines and pagers.

Around 8,000 fax machines are used in the NHS today, making our health service the biggest consumers of fax machines anywhere in the world. These fax machines cause patients to miss appointments and hospitals to lose records, and they cost NHS bodies millions of pounds in paper storage every year, as well as being slow, unwieldy and hard to maintain. Thankfully, some NHS trusts, such as Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust, have started to axe the fax, but more hospitals need to follow. My Bill would go a step further by putting the target into law. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has pointed out, the rest of the world has transitioned from fax to email. The NHS should not be left behind.

Pagers are equally outdated in our health service. Having been first patented for use in a hospital the year after the NHS was founded, back in the 1940s, the pager’s popularity peaked in the 1990s, when there were around 60 million pagers in use around the world. In the time since, pagers have little changed, and their obvious limitations have meant that most have disappeared from use—everywhere, that is, except some parts of the NHS. Just 1 million pagers are now believed to be in use around the world, yet more than 100,000 of them—10% of the entire global stock—are to be found throughout the NHS. They are now redundant, especially as NHS Digital has embarked on a project to ensure that all our hospitals have secure and reliable wi-fi access. With that project in train, there is now simply no good reason why pagers should still be used. As a result of the pager’s many limitations—from allowing only one-way communication to the inability to send graphics—doctors and nurses are regularly turning to insecure instant messaging services to send patient information to colleagues without consent.

A recent British Medical Journal survey found that 97% of clinicians have used insecure messaging systems to send data to colleagues. Such practice should not continue. Better alternatives are available, including WhatsApp-style messenger systems such as Medic Bleep, where senders can post detailed messages and see when they have been delivered and read. In fact, a trial of the device at West Suffolk Hospital found that Medic Bleep saves nurses more than 20 minutes per shift, and doctors around 50 minutes per shift. The local NHS trust already estimates potential savings of £4.5 million per year by freeing up the equivalent of 18 full-time nurses and 18 full-time junior doctors. If replicated across the whole NHS in England, that could save the health service more than £1 billion a year. That means more time for our doctors and nurses to spend with patients and more money for frontline services.

I am grateful that this Bill has received cross-party support. I am especially grateful to the 11 co-sponsors from a range of parties. I am particularly grateful to my hon. Friends the Members for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall), for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson), and the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) who are in their places in the Chamber this afternoon. They are all strong champions of the NHS in their constituencies and in this House, and I am particularly grateful for their support as this Bill makes its way through the House. I believe that safeguarding the NHS for the future benefits every community represented in this House, and I am grateful for the support of colleagues across the Chamber. By axing the fax and purging the pager, we can put in place a firm foundation on which to build a digital-first NHS—an NHS that fully harnesses the benefits of the fourth industrial revolution, and an NHS that provides our constituents with the care that they deserve. I commend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.
Ordered,

Alan Mak accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March, and to be printed (Bill 341).

Estimates Day

[5TH ALLOTED DAY]

SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATE 2018-19

Department for Education


Motion made, and Question proposed,
That, for the year ending with 31 March 2019, for expenditure by the Department for Education—

1. further resources, not exceeding £13,388,055,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 1966,
2. further resources, not exceeding £4,460,127,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and
3. a further sum, not exceeding £4,775,855,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—(Anne Milton.)

2.53 pm

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Let me put on record my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate. For some newer Members of this House who may not realise this, thanks is also owed to the Procedure Committee. When I first arrived in Parliament, it was impossible to debate proper facts, figures and the Budget in the estimates debate without being ruled out of order. The Chair of the Procedure Committee and I decided that that was not good enough and we worked together to try to make sure that we could get these debates, which are now granted by the Backbench Business Committee. I warn the Minister that we are well prepared to go through the numbers in her budget. I am sure that, as an assiduous Minister, she is well prepared to take on board our concerns and to answer them. We have worked closely with the National Audit Office in preparing for today’s debate so that we can focus on the actual figures.
I know the Minister is assiduous and will not try to give us smoke and mirrors in her answers. Hopefully, she will answer not in slogans, but in actual figures.

Today, I plan to discuss the overall schools budget. I know that the Chair of the Education Committee, the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), will also pick up on some of these issues. Other colleagues will be highlighting concerns around the spending on academies and multi-academy trusts, which, of course, report directly to the Department, teacher recruitment and retention, potentially the student loan book sales—although I see that the Member concerned is held up in a Statutory Instrument Committee—funding for Ofsted and the inspection regime; further education and higher education; and early years and special educational needs. The Minister will have her work cut out to make sure that she is over the detail, as I am sure that she is.

One reason why we wanted this debate is that the Government often repeat that more money is going into schools than ever before. In March 2017—on one of many occasions—the Public Accounts Committee looked at the sustainability of school funding. This was at the point when schools were already implementing a Government set target of £3 billion of efficiency savings—£1.7 billion of which was through more efficient use of staff, and £1.3 billion through more efficient procurement.

The House would expect the Public Accounts Committee, which I have the privilege of chairing, to be absolutely on board with the idea that schools should be as efficient as they can be, certainly with regard to procurement—where schools buy their paper or their electricity from. It is quite right that schools should be encouraged and supported to find the money that can be put into frontline teaching. We were concerned, however, that the Department did not really have a grip on what the impact of those efficiency savings would be, particularly on staff. It did not know what the impact would be in the classrooms and on the teaching in schools that had already found those efficiency savings, or on the outcomes for children.

I am delighted to see that the Secretary of State is in his place. I know that he feels passionately about the need to make sure that children are getting everything that they can from our schools. It is therefore important and incumbent on him and his Department to make sure that, when they are setting the budget or implementing efficiency savings or cuts, they understand what the impact is on school attainment. While we are discussing efficiency savings or cuts, they understand what the impact is on school attainment. While we are discussing efficiency savings or cuts, they understand what the impact is on school attainment. While we are discussing efficiency savings or cuts, they understand what the impact is on school attainment.

One of the key issues is to ensure that, when they are setting the budget or implementing efficiency savings or cuts, they understand what the impact is on school attainment. While we are discussing efficiency savings or cuts, they understand what the impact is on school attainment. While we are discussing efficiency savings or cuts, they understand what the impact is on school attainment. While we are discussing efficiency savings or cuts, they understand what the impact is on school attainment.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I did a survey just before and after the 2017 general election. Out of 103 schools in Coventry, 102 were finding increases in class sizes. The cuts measured pupil by pupil amounted to £295. We had a debate yesterday about sex education in schools. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is another burden being loaded on to our schools? We have a situation in Coventry where schools badly need additional funding regardless of what the Government were going to allow because they are starting from a very low basis. In other words, the Government owe education £3.5 billion, despite the fact that they put in £1.5 billion.

Meg Hillier: My hon. Friend tees me up for my next point. He also raises an important point. It is a political disease to ask schools to do more all the time and very often assume that it can just be done without the additional funding. It is important that the Secretary of State and his ministerial team watch closely that, while other bits of Government suggest that schools do things, there is the funding in place for that and for the core of what they should be delivering. It was after the general election and as a result of that campaign and that pressure on the Government, who were then elected without a majority, that the Secretary of State announced £1.3 billion of additional funding, which was weighted towards next year. This year, schools are in the throes of receiving the £416 million that was announced for this year and will receive £884 million in aggregate across England for next year. But that—the £3 billion figure—does not even backfill those efficiency demands that were asked for before. It is important that we recognise—in fact, the Government have recognised this—that we need £99,000 school places, which is as a result of the increase between 2010 and 2015. We are very concerned about the pressure on school budgets.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): I have often heard Ministers say in justification of restrictions on school budgets that there are large balances. In my own constituency of West Bromwich West, the cumulative shortfall in schools came to nearly £5 million between 2017-18 and 2018-19. The cumulative reserves of all the schools in Sandwell is £3 million. There is now hard evidence that the balances left in schools in local authorities are no longer adequate to meet the year-by-year shortfalls that are taking place in them.

Meg Hillier: I am going to move on, in particular, to the issue of capital funding where sometimes reserves are built up for capital funding purposes. Looking at what is happening in schools, I really want to give the lie to the argument that more money is going into schools than ever before. The Government say that, and we can look at it in cash terms, but we need to look at it in terms of per-pupil funding. The Department is estimating that over the 2015 spending review period, pupil numbers will rise by 3.9%, or 174,000, for primary school pupils and 10.3%, or 284,000 for secondary school pupils. Therefore, funding per pupil will, on average, rise only from £5,447 in 2015-16 to £5,519 in 2019-20—next year. That is a real-terms reduction once inflation is taken into account.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The hon. Lady is making a very powerful case. Does she agree that these cuts are often hurting the most vulnerable
people most? Headteachers in my constituency are really concerned about teaching for special educational needs, with heartbreaking stories about schools having to lose their SEN teachers because they simply cannot afford them any more. These cuts really are having massive effects on individuals as well.

Meg Hillier: The hon. Lady raises a significant point. In my own constituency, since 2011, special educational needs provision has been backed up by the local authority through other funds that are now being squeezed because of the other funding caps.

The other point I would make very firmly to the Secretary of State is that so much of what happens in our schools is not just reliant on the Department for Education. If there are cuts in other parts of government or reductions in spending, there is a real squeeze where schools are sometimes expected to fill the gap but without the funding. This needs to be looked at in the round. We on the Committee are repeatedly concerned about what we call cost-shunting, where a saving is made in one area but the costs fall on another. A teacher or a headteacher with children in front of them in a classroom has to deal with the reality of that, and they do so very ably but often with great difficulty.

It is not just the Public Accounts Committee or the National Audit Office that is concerned about per-pupil funding. In 2018, only last year, the Institute for Fiscal Studies concluded: “Between 2009-10 and 2017-18, total school spending per pupil in England fell by about 8% in real terms.” In October last year, the UK Statistics Authority wrote to the DFE complaining about its misleading use of statistics on school funding. So I hope that we have nailed the lie about the funding. We need to acknowledge where we are and then we can have a debate about how much we should be funding our schools by.

In the time I have got—I do not want to take up colleagues’ time because I know that they have prepared hard for this debate—I want to touch on capital funding. I congratulate the Department and the permanent secretary on undertaking a stock conditions survey of the school estate. This is the first time that that has properly happened. It is quite shocking, really, that Governments, over time, have not done this. It is quite challenging because schools are under different ownerships. It is a good and welcome step, but of course, as the Secretary of State will know, it will throw up many issues for him. Some 60% of the school estate was built before 1976, which underlines, for those of us thinking of the schools in our constituencies, the amount of work involved. The National Audit Office estimates that £6.7 billion is needed to return all school buildings to satisfactory or better condition. They are not all to be fantastic and “all singing, all dancing” but just to be satisfactory or, in some cases, better. In 2015-16—the beginning of the spending review period—the DFE allocated £4.5 billion to capital funding, about half of which was spent on creating new school places. So there is a significant shortfall in what is needed and the amount of money that is being spent, and that has an ongoing impact.

Then there is the free schools agenda, where the Secretary of State is wedded to his manifesto commitment of 500 new free schools by 2020 from the 2017 base. I think that there will be just over 850 if that target is reached. We are concerned that those buildings are not the best. Asbestos surveys are relatively frequent. Local government treasurers tell me that they know of buildings in their own areas that have been sold at well over the odds. It is as though people see a blank cheque when the Government come along with their cheque book for a free school site: the price goes up. That is not good value for money, and it really does need looking at. I do not think that even those most wedded to the free schools principle would want to see money wasted. In my own constituency, where many secondary schools were rebuilt under the academies programme and we have fantastic buildings, it breaks my heart to see new schools opening in inadequate buildings without sports facilities, without proper access, and often with very little in the way of playground facilities. I do not have to time to go into all that, but I recommend to the Department the reports we have done on this, because it is a very big concern.

The biggest concern for me on capital funding is about asbestos. I have a very strong constituency link here. I have a constituent, Lucie Stephens, whose mother was a primary schoolteacher for 30 years and died from mesothelioma—the cancer that comes from exposure to asbestos. She should have been enjoying her retirement now, but instead she is not because she caught this disease from working in a school that had asbestos in it. We looked at this on the Public Accounts Committee. The Department for Education has reported that over 80% of the schools that have now responded to its survey have asbestos. It has estimated that it would cost at least £100 billion to replace the entire school estate—the only way, really, to eradicate asbestos from our school buildings—but in January this year, we found that nearly a quarter of schools had still not provided the information that the Department needs to understand the extent of asbestos in school buildings and how the risks will be managed. Three times now, the Department has had to go back with a different deadline to get those schools responding. The last deadline was 15 February—just over a week ago. Does the Minister have an update on that? We have suggested that it is perhaps time to name and shame those schools. I do not say that lightly, but it is a very serious issue for those concerned.

My big concern is that there is no real incentive for schools to acknowledge their asbestos and get the expensive surveys done without some understanding of where the money will then come from to resolve it. It is not something that will be urgent in every school, and some schools will last a bit longer without it. Clearly, there needs to be a long-term plan and everyone needs to know what it is. There must be a clear plan from central Government with a pot of funding that schools can bid for. As we have heard, reserves and capital funding are very squeezed—squeezed to nothing in many cases, and certainly not enough to pay for asbestos removal or for a new school building. I urge the Secretary of State to be the one who finally upgrades our school buildings so that they are all as good as those in my constituency and the one who does not allow bad free schools to open.

As I said, there are many other issues that many colleagues in all parts of the House will be raising—everything from early years through to higher education—and I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response.
There is a real issue about how we debate school funding, particularly in how we talk about the numbers. We need to make sure that we are actually talking about the same numbers, and then we can move on to a discussion about policy. Unless we get the maths right, we are talking at cross-purposes.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. As colleagues can see, a number of speakers wish to contribute to this debate and to the debate after it. They are both very well subscribed. I am therefore going to impose a seven-minute time limit. I was able to warn the next speaker that that would happen.

3.7 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I thank the hon. Members for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) and for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) for going to the Backbench Committee together to request this debate.

I want to concentrate my remarks on the Department’s expenditure on schools and colleges, into which we are currently conducting an inquiry. The Education Committee wants to support the DFE in making the strongest possible representation to the Treasury as part of the spending review. Last year we launched our inquiry to look at the Department’s plans to introduce a national funding formula for schools and the role of targeted support for disadvantaged pupils alongside the influence of the spending review process. Our initial concern was that the three-to-four-year spending review period had far too little in common with the educational experience of young people who start primary school at around five and now participate in some form of education or training until they are 18. School and college funding is inextricably linked to both social justice and productivity, as I will set out in this short contribution.

It is not at all clear that the Department or the Treasury takes a sufficiently strategic approach. The last spending review settlement failed to foresee the cumulative impact of rising pupil numbers and several smaller factors—some of them explicit policy initiatives—that led to the 8% of unmet cost pressures on school budgets over the following year or so. It is also deeply regrettable that the debate around school and college funding has become so polarised. Schools are under pressure, but, as we heard this morning from Andreas Schleicher from the OECD, simply asking for more money will not necessarily lead to better educational outcomes. The debate on education funding needs to move away from one about an abstract concept of equity—the principle underpinning fair funding—towards one of sufficiency, where schools and colleges have the money they need to do the job asked of them.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I am listening with great interest to my right hon. Friend’s analysis. Does he agree that this Government have a proud record on education spending and achievement and should be congratulated? However, there are particular areas where we would like to raise issues, as he is doing. In addition to what he is saying about utilising resources, I advise him that in the Borough of Bexley, we saw an increase in the number of education, health and care plans of 14% between 2017 and 2018, and yet there has been only a 1.9% increase in the high needs block allocation this year.

Robert Halfon: My right hon. Friend is right. As he will hear in my remarks, I agree with much of what he says. We have to praise the Government for the good things that have happened but identify the funding problems.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way, and I commend his Committee’s decision to launch the inquiry that he just referenced. Can he ensure that the inquiry takes a brief but particular look at the plight facing Catholic sixth-form colleges? Many do not see themselves as having sufficient funding in the long run, as is the case for many other further education colleges, but they do not have the option of converting to an academy—a route that there are incentives to take—because of their religious character. There is not yet a solution other than to increase funding for all. Will he particularly reference the plight of those 17 English Catholic sixth-form colleges?

Robert Halfon: The inquiry covers schools and colleges, so that issue will form part of it. I note the hon. Gentleman’s point and will ensure that we address it in some way or another in our Committee.

We should welcome the introduction of a national formula as the latest step in almost 20 years of reform in education funding. There are serious problems with the way that schools are expected to budget, not least being asked to do so over three years without the information to make reliable forecasts more than a year ahead. I hope the House will forgive me if I take the opportunity to give my strongest support to the plight of further education. I know that the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills is passionate in her support and is lobbying the Treasury for more FE funding.

FE has for too long been the poor relation between secondary and higher education. By 2020, we will be spending the same amount in real terms to educate and train 16 to 18-year-olds as we were in 1990. I was shocked to discover that that is not an accident of history, but the result of a conscious policy choice of almost a decade ago. FE is a great example of why a national funding formula in and of itself is not a panacea. Without enough money to go around, it does not matter.

The time has come for a completely different approach to how we think of schools and colleges in this country. Rather than the Department for Education being one of many Departments scrapping it out every few years for the meagre rewards of the political cycle, Ministers need to take a leaf from the book of the Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England and make a bold bid for a 10-year long-term plan that starts to close the gap between inputs—broadly, in this context, the money—and outcomes at both an individual level, in the form of emerging from school a well-rounded person with prospects, and the wider economic level of having young people ready and able to fulfil the productivity part of the picture. We do not fully recognise the potential value of getting our education system right, and the DFE should make as much as it can of that in
its negotiations with the Treasury. As a country, we have recognised the long-term necessity of funding the national health service, but without, it seems, the prior necessity of getting school and college funding right as a vital public service.

What would that mean in practice? For a start, we have to move beyond the rhetoric of school cuts versus more money than ever going into schools. That was the starting point of our inquiry and will be an important starting point for our report this year. The truth is that both characterisations are only very partial accounts and keep us talking about inputs rather than outcomes. The relationship between those inputs and outcomes is not simple and causal, as Mr Schleicher told the Committee this morning, but that is emphatically not the same as saying that schools can magically deliver world-beating results at the same time as moving from savings in their non-staff budgets to savings in their staff budgets. When we learn that students in Poland perform at the same level at age 15 as those in the United States, but with per student expenditure that is around 40% lower than in the United States, we need to consider whether simply asking for more money without a plan will get us where we want to be.

We need to take a long, hard look at some flagship policies and be open to questioning whether they are delivering against our stated policy objectives, especially when they engage social justice. Disadvantaged pupils perform a lot worse at school. Just 33% of pupils on free school meals get five good GCSEs, including English and maths, compared with 61% of their better-off peers. The Committee has already expressed its concern that the Government’s policy of funded childcare for three and four-year-olds is entrenching disadvantage and preventing the closure of the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers from better-off backgrounds. I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), is passionately supportive of our maintained nurseries and is working incredibly hard to persuade the Treasury to guarantee the transition funding that maintained nurseries desperately need.

The consequences of not making the most of the time for which a child is at school last a lifetime, and the pieces are picked up by many other Departments across Government. If schools are increasingly being looked at to prevent some of these problems from occurring, it seems only right that schools receive the resources necessary to do so. I hope that Ministers will use the support in this House for a 10-year, truly long-term plan to secure the best possible deal from the spending review. The logic is inescapable—if the NHS can have a 10-year plan, why cannot education too?

I hope that this will be the start of a different sort of planning for schools and colleges. If education really is to be a ladder of opportunity for everyone, so that people can get the education, skills and training to climb to the top and get the jobs, skills and prosperity that they and our country need, surely there should be a proper strategic overview and a long-term plan to ensure that everyone has the tools and support necessary to climb that ladder.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate. One of the reasons I decided to go into politics was that I saw in our country that inequalities later in life stem from the fact that a child from a poor background is less likely to go on and do well in school than one from a richer background. I will reiterate some of the figures that the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) used about that. Some families in our country are able to spend more on school fees for their children per year than many people earn in salaries. I know that many Members speaking in this debate are motivated by the same thing—they want to improve education across the board, but particularly for children from deprived backgrounds. That is why I want to start with the point made powerfully by the Chairman of the Education Committee—we are lucky to have him—about FE funding, because it is often overlooked in these debates.

We talk about schools and we talk about early years, and I want to talk about those two things as well, but I want to start with FE funding. The Institute for Fiscal Studies recently produced a report saying that further education was the “biggest loser” in the cuts to education. I know that the Secretary of State is very passionate about learning from other countries, such as Germany, but if we are serious about putting our mainstream education and our vocational education on the same footing and valuing both equally, we really need to look again at further education funding.

The principal of the City of Wolverhampton College tells me about the funding pressures he is under, as are the other Black Country colleges in Dudley and Walsall. We have some really fantastic colleges in our region, but we know that their funding has been frozen for far too long. National funding rates for 16 and 17-year-olds have stayed at £4,000 per pupil since 2014; they have not increased in line with inflation. For 18-year-olds, the rate has been frozen at £3,300 per pupil.

I say this because I think the Ministers sitting on the Treasury Bench know about the cost pressures. I served in a Committee on a statutory instrument with the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills, where we talked about how we could make provision for colleges that find themselves in a position of insolvency. Well, that tells us everything, doesn’t it? We have not had that until now, but the Government have felt they had to make provision for it. I really think we need to think again about the funding for these colleges.

I know that many of my constituents feel they do not want to stay at school, but want to go to college and perhaps study a more vocational course, and Wolverhampton college has some fantastic vocational courses. However, even though there are cost pressures on schools—the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), set those out very eloquently—they are nothing compared with the cost pressures on further education colleges. I am trying to strengthen the arm of Ministers, and I implore them to put more pressure on the Treasury and to make some different decisions about the amount of money going to these colleges.

My second point—I have in a way done this the wrong way around by starting off with the older category—is just to urge the Government for some clarity on the
funding for maintained nursery schools. I have three maintained nursery schools in my constituency, and I am lucky that I have so many. They provide outstanding and good education, and they are a trailblazer for the rest of early years provision in my area. They can help children with special needs in a way that other early years provision is not able to do. I have seen at first hand some of the work they do with some of the most deprived children, and also with some of the children who have the most acute needs in my constituency.

It pains me to hear from those maintained nurseries that, because their teachers do not know what is going to happen beyond 2020, there is a real concern that some of the staff may well leave, as they have mortgages and things in their own lives they have to plan for. I really implore Ministers to hurry up with the assessment that I understand the Government are doing on the value for money of maintained nurseries. I can tell them that, in my own constituency, they are great value for money, and they will hear that from other Members across the House. Maintained nurseries need clarity, and they need it sooner rather than later. I hope that, at some point in the next few weeks or months, we will get that clarity.

My final point is about school funding. I am concerned about the real-terms cuts in school funding. I understand the Chair of the Education Committee when he says that we just argue to and fro, which I do not want to do, about figures and whether schools are really that badly off or not. I was very interested to hear his comparison with the NHS plan. I would certainly welcome a more long-term plan for schools in our country. Some primary schools in my constituency are telling me they are having to lay off teaching assistants and, in some cases, teachers because of pressures on their budgets.

I urge Ministers to look at this again, because unless we can provide a world-class education for our young children, we will not only fail to close the inequalities in our society; we will not thrive as a country because, as has already been said in this debate, this issue relates to productivity, to how we attract investment and to our overall prosperity.

3.23 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak in this very important estimates debate.

I would like to start where the Chair of the Education Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), who made an excellent speech, finished. Every child in this country deserves a fair chance to get on the ladder of opportunity to the best of his or her abilities. While I warmly welcome the record funding that is going into education in this country at the moment, the problem is that, in some areas on the ground in our constituencies, it does not feel like that. I want to concentrate on those areas, particularly the funding of schools and further education colleges.

I welcome this debate and the increase in the departmental expenditure limit, up from £66.4 billion to £77.9 billion, although most of the increase is to cover the write-off of student loans. I also welcome the introduction of the new funding formula’s money for schools in April 2018, which should provide £4,800 per secondary pupil and £3,500 per primary pupil. The problem, as my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench know, is that the local authority distributes this money, which means that quite a number of schools in my constituency do not even receive that amount.

I am grateful to follow my friend the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), who chairs the Public Accounts Committee, on which I serve as deputy Chair. Secondary schools in her constituency—I do not mean this in any personal or political way; her constituency just happens to be at the top of the league—receive on average £7,840 per pupil, which is a 64% increase on schools in my constituency. I ask my colleagues on the Front Bench whether that is really fair. In addition to that 64% increase, quite a lot of the schools in her constituency get the pupil premium money. One wonders, given the funding streams in this country, whether there is an element of double counting.

Of course school costs will be higher in a central London constituency, but even in Gloucestershire, costs such as the national teachers’ pay award increase in 2018, the apprenticeship levy imposition, additional HR costs, increased pension costs, higher levels of special needs and higher rural bus costs, all of which are imposed by Government, amount to about 6%. Therefore, if the Government increase their cash amount this year by 1%, it is effectively a 5% budget cut, which has to be met by efficiencies. Things have been pared down over a number of years.

Mr Will Morgan, the excellent headteacher of the excellent Cotswold School in Bourton-on-the-Water, recently wrote to me to say:

“Over recent years we have made many savings—class sizes, teacher contact time, TA support, service costs, reducing leadership, etc. Despite this, if finances continue as they are and we do nothing, we will be in deficit as a school at some point in the 2021-22 academic year.

One of our strategies to try to alleviate this ‘cliff edge’ is to ask parents to donate—for many, including myself, this goes against what we should be doing”.

That is what is happening on the ground. We need to fund our schools at a level at which they can operate properly.

When I have discussed this with various Schools Ministers in recent years, they have always told me that their Department was going to do some work on what it really costs to run a secondary school and a primary school. There are certainly inescapable costs: the teachers have to be paid, the buildings have to be maintained and kept warm, and there has to be an administration function. Let us find out what it really costs and ensure that no school anywhere in the country goes below that level. As others have said before, if we go below that level, schools have to make cuts, either in teachers or in curriculum subjects.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his significant speech, and I concur with the point he has just made. In the London Borough of Lewisham, 71 of 73 schools are facing cuts, and are losing £8.8 million between 2015 and 2020.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that intervention. Nobody wants to see any schools having to make cuts; they want to see every school trying to attain outstanding Ofsted reports, to be able to educate all their children and pupils to the best possible standard according to their abilities.
I say to my colleagues on the Front Bench that I believe the maxim should be that similar schools with similar demographics, wherever they are in the UK, should receive similar funding. Unfortunately, I was unable to find an example in the time available. I ask my hon. Friends on the Treasury Bench how they intend to address that problem, and bring to their attention two other problems in the primary and secondary sectors. Gloucestershire is a well-run local authority. At the moment, it does not run a deficit in its education funding, but a number of local education authorities do. However, we have two serious emerging problems in Gloucestershire, which I hope my hon. Friends on the Front Bench will listen to seriously.

The first relates to the higher needs block. In Gloucestershire, the higher needs block has increased by 40% over three years. We were incredibly grateful when the Minister announced an extra £1.3 million over two years. That will be helpful over the next two or three years, but we have to address the structural problem.

The second point I would like to bring to the attention of my hon. Friends. Friends is the significant increase in the number of exclusions in some schools, so that they do not have to bear the costs and difficulty of dealing with difficult pupils. It does seem—I ask my hon. Friends to do some work on this—that certain schools have consistently higher exclusions than others. That must be to do with a school’s policy, rather than a policy that suits the individual pupil. That cannot be right. I would like to know what happens to those excluded pupils. Some return to school and that is good. Some are withdrawn from the register entirely and may be home educated, where they receive pretty scant attention from the state. Some will be educated excellently at home, but I suspect some will receive little education at home. Some will be looked after by social services. Sadly, some will end up in the criminal justice system. That cannot be right.

Finally, in the last minute available to me, I would like to talk about further education. The principal of Cirencester College, the only college to trial T-levels in Gloucestershire at the moment, contacted me the other day to say that rather than the £4,800 per pupil it would get in the national funding formula, he is receiving between £3,600 and £4,000 per pupil. That amount has been constant for five years, despite increased costs. He says he has had to reduce subjects, teachers and mental health services, and that the funding is half of what a university student receives. He says his funding for doing the same job should, in all fairness, be the same as if his pupils were receiving A-level education in sixth form. He has higher costs in a rural area and says rurality should be one of the factors in the formula. That would help schools in rural areas like his.

3.32 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I would like to put on the record my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), who leads the Public Accounts Committee so well, and the National Audit Office. It is fair to say that I rely heavily on the reports the NAO produces and I think it does a wonderful job. I would also like to give a shout out to Botley Primary School—I am a governor—because it got the call from Ofsted yesterday and is in the thick of it. Given that the first thing I am going to talk about is Ofsted, it would be fair to wish the school good luck today. I know they will do us all very proud.

As governors, we focus heavily on school funding. In my local area, a school recently wrote to parents to ask for pencils and pens because it cannot afford them. Another school—I will not mention which one—is consulting, quietly and behind the scenes, on going down to a four-day week, because it cannot afford to keep its teachers at full-time level; if it did, it would have to start going into severe deficits. In the context of the estimates, what we want to know is this: if there are funding pressures, are they affecting outcomes? In the end, that is what it is about. Are they affecting outcomes? Are they driving value for money or not? What are the outcomes of the policy decisions themselves? Today is about not party political speeches, but looking at the evidence in front of us.

The Public Accounts Committee has been looking at a whole host of issues, including school accountability and governance. When, with the Department for Education, governors and parents, we have explored where the buck stops on school accountability, the picture is, unfortunately, quite muddled. No one can tell us empirically where the buck is meant to stop. The Department for Education says that it is up to the multi-academy trusts or local authorities, who say that it is down to the governors, who rely very heavily on Ofsted to be able to say whether or not these funding pressures are leading to lower or higher outcomes. In fact, I think Amanda Spielman slightly overstepped her initial remit—but quite rightly—in saying that there are definitely outcome failures in the FE sector as a result of the financial pressures that many Members have mentioned today. She said that we do not empirically know whether that is happening in schools or not, but our argument is that if we had the proper data, we could probably get a better idea of what is going on.

This is at a time when Ofsted’s own budget is under pressure. Its remit has expanded significantly since 2000, with successive Governments of all colours having asked it to do more and more. As well as schools, its remit now covers other sectors including children’s social care, early years and childcare, further education and skills providers. Meanwhile, its budget has had a decrease—a cut—of 40%. I will go on to talk about more things that I wish Ofsted would do, but the better question may be: what is our mechanism for school improvement and accountability? Is Ofsted the right provider to be able to do this? I know that the Department is consulting on the new Ofsted inspection framework, which we absolutely welcome, but as part of that, we need to carefully consider whether introducing even more into Ofsted’s budget is the right thing to do or whether it is time to have another body altogether.

Passing the buck is more than just a financial matter and more than just about data and numbers: it is also a matter for the community and its parents. One of the
more striking sessions in the Public Accounts Committee was when we had campaigners from Whitehaven Academy, whose community shouted from the rooftops about the financial mismanagement and irregularities that were happening in that school. One of the questions that we asked was, “What does it take to get these things looked at?” It took two MPs of different parties, one of whom was forcibly removed from the premises when they visited the school. There was a “Panorama” investigation and we still do not fully know the outcome of what has happened in Whitehaven. This continues to drag on and my Twitter feed is full of parents who are shouting yet again from the rooftops, “Where does the buck stop?”

Meanwhile, we have the Durand Academy, whose school was transferred to the Dunraven Educational Trust. The first canaries in this case were back in 2014. The Public Accounts Committee had a hearing on this issue in January 2015 and in it identified a “lack of clarity about who ultimately owned assets”, governance arrangements that were “overly complex and opaque”, a “lack of effective timely intervention by the” Department for Education and the FSA, and that the “lack of an appropriate fit and proper persons test”, had allowed directors to run the trust who developed “inappropriate business interests”. How on earth did it take until August 2018 for the funding to finally be cut? It is extraordinary.

Our argument is that this is partly because we now have a muddled twin-track system of schooling, where there are local authority-maintained schools of the older style with this new academies system. It has really been only this year—the first time was last year, and now this year—that we have seen the accounts, so that we can properly assess how this system is working alongside the other. We know, for example, that it takes a certain amount of money to convert schools into academies. In fact, in 2017-18 the Department for Education spent £59 million on conversion and re-brokering, but what about the extra costs to local authorities in doing that? What about the hollowing out of local authorities’ ability to support maintained schools? That was an area that the Public Accounts Committee was concerned about. It is an example of cost-shunting by removing an aspect of the system in one part of schools. As far as kids are concerned, they do not care whether they are in academies, free schools or maintained schools.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): In my constituency, schools are now almost completely responsible for funding support services. Currently, local schools are covering a shortfall of £2.3 million for higher needs schools. Does my hon. Friend agree that this represents a total failure of the Government to invest in the future of our children?

Layla Moran: Indeed, we have heard about the higher needs block; that is yet another area where there is cost-shunting.

On the twin-track system, what we need to do is look beyond: is one system better than the other? Actually, we have a lot to learn from the sorts of innovations that we are seeing in schools, but I am not convinced from the evidence we have seen in the Public Accounts Committee that we have a handle on the data. In our recommendations to the Department we have asked it to look at, for example, different types of multi-academy trusts—is there a difference between those that are locally based and those that are spread out or between the rural and urban? Is there a north-south divide when it comes to academy trusts? What can we learn from the data? At the moment, when the accounts are produced, we do not have that data.

I very much echo what the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) was saying earlier. I firmly believe that this is not just a question of more money for schools. More money is welcome to get them working as they hope to now, but the issue is also about driving efficiency and spreading best practice. Without the data, how will we know what is working best?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I gently remind colleagues that if they are going to intervene, it is important that they should have been in the Chamber for the whole speech and a little bit of the debate as well.

3.41 pm

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Some years before I came to this place, I chaired something called the Grant Maintained Schools Advisory Committee. For many years, we fought for a national funding formula. We failed because the civil servants kept saying that there would always be winners and losers—well, there are winners and losers now.

When the Minister for School Standards, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb), came up with a proposed national funding formula a few years ago, I was really excited because I thought that we were going to crack the nut. When he came up with the proposal, most of my schools were going to be winners; now, they are all—or nearly all—losers. We are not doing well in my area. I am really disappointed that the national funding formula really has not benefited my area at all. There are two local authorities: a unitary one in Derby city, and Derbyshire County Council. There is very little difference between the two.

Schools are already benefiting from more money: many schools that have been historically underfunded will attract up to 6% more per pupil compared with 2017-18. The Minister for School Standards said on 24 July last year:

“The formula allocates every local authority more money for every pupil, in every school, in both 2018-19 and 2019-20, compared to their 2017-18 baselines.”—[Official Report, 24 July 2018; Vol. 645, c. 67WS.] As my right hon. Friend stated, money is welcome; before is going to our schools. School funding is at a record high. The core schools budget has increased to £42.4 billion this academic year and is set to rise to £43.5 billion in 2019-20, and that follows the additional £1.3 billion of funding over and above what was promised in the last spending review.

That all sounds really good, and it is good news for Mid Derbyshire in terms of the school block allocation, which has seen a 2.9% increase since 2013. But that is against a backdrop of an average 4.6% increase in the east midlands region; across the UK, there has been a 4.8% increase. Although, the increase is positive, it is disappointing that the increase in Mid Derbyshire is not
as significant as in the region as a whole and in England. The lowest allocation for a primary school in my area is £3,300 per pupil; the highest is £5,351. The schools are not markedly different. They do not have a particularly different intake, do not attract a huge pupil premium or need huge special needs provision. I cannot understand why there is such a disparity. The disparity in secondary education is not so marked: the lowest allocation is £4,629 and the highest £4,801.

Since 2013, 22 out of 29 of my primary schools have seen a decrease in funding. Little Eaton Primary School, which is near where I live, has lost £37 per pupil. Morley Primary School has lost £324. Ashbrook Infant and Nursery School has lost £162. Ashbrook Junior School has lost £14. Duffield Meadows Primary School has lost £25. Belper Long Row Primary School has lost £149. Pottery Primary School has lost £7, which is not so bad. Milford Community Primary School has lost £925. Herbert Strutt Primary School has lost £180. Breadsall Church of England VC Primary School has lost £245. St Andrew’s Church of England Primary in Stanley has lost £477. St Elizabeth’s Catholic Primary School has lost £16. William Gilbert Endowed Church of England Primary School has lost £45. Redhill Primary School has lost £105. Portway Infant School has lost £70, and the junior school has lost £146. Asterdale Primary School has lost £648. Springfield Primary School has lost £531. St Werburgh’s Church of England VA Primary School has lost £179. Lawn Primary School has lost £3, which is also not too bad. Borrow Wood Primary School has lost £185. The only secondary school to lose funding is Allestree Woodlands School, which, although it is not in a very different catchment area from the other three secondary schools, has lost £87 per pupil. The others have gained by £50-plus.

Little Eaton Primary School—which, as I have said, is near where I live—is receiving £3,542 per pupil, while in 2013 it was receiving £3,579 and in 2015 the figure rose to £3,730, its highest point, but it has still lost money. I do not understand why there are such disparities in funding, given the national funding formula, given that these are very similar schools with very similar catchment areas and very similar results, with no huge number of pupils with special needs—there are some, but it is a fairly average number—and without a huge amount of deprivation.

I urge the Secretary of State and his Ministers to think again. I do not like being negative, because the Government has done some amazing things for education and I applaud them for everything that they have done, but in this instance, in my constituency, I think that they have gone wrong.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. There are still a number of Members who wish to speak, so after the next speaker I will reduce the limit to six minutes.

3.47 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) on a very evidence-based, thought-provoking and powerful speech. The tone of today’s debate has, in fact, been sombre and evidence-based. There is a strong message for Ministers: this is the reality of cuts. We can bandy numbers and arguments across the Dispatch Box all we like, but this is the reality that schools are facing. There are facts, there are figures and there are numbers, and they represent the reality of people’s lives and the reality of the cuts in our constituencies.

The debate is timely for me, because a number of parents have come to my surgeries and expressed great concern about school cuts, and a large number of headteachers and governors have come to me in groups to tell me about the distress that they feel because they cannot continue to deliver the standard of education that they have been used to delivering, and that our children need.

I commend the primary schools in Redcar and Cleveland, which are among the best in the country. I particularly congratulate St Bede’s Catholic Primary School in Marske—and all the parents, staff and children on being named by The Times as the best state primary school in the country. That is a phenomenal achievement, but all the schools in my area, particularly the primaries, are finding it increasingly difficult to deliver the standard that children need against a backdrop of cuts. According to the School Cuts website, Redcar and Cleveland’s budget will have been reduced by £4.3 million in real terms between 2015 and 2020. That is a per-pupil loss of £226.

I hear grumbling about the statistics from the Government Front Bench. Let me set out the reality of what this means to our schools. Teachers and heads in my constituency are going above and beyond to try to ensure that the children are not affected by the scale of the cuts. It epitomises the quality, care and passion of our staff that they are willing to do these things to try to make sure the cuts are absorbed and the children are not affected. In one school a member of staff has suggested that staff should be regraded for one day a week—graded down from their actual worth, value and achievement—to make savings in staffing costs. Two staff members who are eligible to apply to go through the pay threshold suggested they would not apply to do so because they did not want the school budget to increase.

Support staff have had their hours cut by an average of five hours per week. That might not sound like a huge cut, but these support staff have on average contracts of only 15 hours a week so they are losing a third of their week’s pay. Local churches have been donating money from their charities to help fund curriculum budgets—not little extras but curriculum budgets, an area in which schools have had to make large cuts.

Teachers tell us about the voluntary help they receive in the classroom—people giving up their time free of charge. Without that voluntary work they would not be able to deliver the best teaching practice and would therefore be failing our children. We are reliant on the voluntary sector; I do not think that what David Cameron’s big society was supposed to be doing—replacing and enabling the fundamental education of our children in schools.

Governors have told me they are concerned that next year things will be even worse as they will have to find extra resources to fund additional pension payments and in all likelihood that will lead to reductions in
teaching staff. I was also struck to the core as I was leaving one of the meetings when I was told that one of the headteachers in my area had to make a member of the cleaning staff redundant to meet the budget that year, but was very upset about it and realised that this just was not practical, safe and hygienic, and he is now paying that member of the cleaning staff from his own salary. That is a ridiculous situation for us to be in in this country, and it is clear that the cuts are to the bone now and schools cannot continue to provide the kind of service they want to offer.

I also want to briefly talk in the time allocated to me about SEND—special educational needs and disability—education as there has been a huge increase in demand for that in my local area and there is real and deep concern. Nationally, demand for services for children and young people with SEND has increased by 35% in just the last four years; that is a huge increase but there has not been the budget to cover it. We are seeing now the reality of that in our constituencies, affecting our children. A recent Local Government Association survey of local authorities found that councils fund support for nearly 320,000 children with complex needs and disabilities but are facing a funding gap of almost £500 million. That gap has been plugged by taking funding from elsewhere in schools, as we have heard, and by drawing down reserves.

The National Association of Head Teachers has published the results of a survey on SEND showing that only 2% of respondents said the top-up funding they received was sufficient to meet individual education, health and care plan statements, while 94% of respondents were finding it harder to resource the support required to meet the needs of pupils with SEND, and 73% said it was harder to resource support for pupils with SEND due to cuts to mainstream funding. This is the reality of what we are seeing: vulnerable children who need the most help and support to flourish and fulfil their potential are those most let down by these cuts. That is balancing the books on the backs of the children who need the most help and support to flourish.

I also want to briefly mention children’s services because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) mentioned, wider cuts are having a knock-on effect as well. Pressure is building right across education and children’s services. In Redcar and Cleveland our children’s services have a £4.2 million overspend. The number of looked-after children is almost double what it was five years ago, and that is alongside the cuts of £90 million that Redcar and Cleveland has seen to its budget, which means it now has a £4.2 million overspend.

Ofsted’s 2017-18 annual report commented on a sharp increase in recent years in demand for assessments to be made, as well as a growing number of refusals by local authorities to do so, and raised concerns about increasing numbers of children awaiting provision despite having a plan in place. In 2018, 2,000 children with a statement were awaiting provision, almost three times more than in 2010.

The tone of today’s debate has been positive, constructive and thoughtful. We all want the same end; we all want our children to have the best start in life, to flourish and to have everything they need from their years in school, but the reality is this cannot happen without funding and the reality is that the funding formulas we have are not working. The support is not there; our schools are being cut to the bone and I urge the Government to do more to make sure every child can fulfil their potential.

3.54 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I congratulate the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), on bringing forward this report. It is good that we have recently had more debating time on things to do with children in schools. We have another debate on schools funding on Monday, and we recently spoke about maintained nursery education and the false economy of not continuing to fund it sustainably. Yesterday, we had the announcement on sex and relationship education. All these things add to the pressures and costs on schools, and I am afraid that the budgets for schools just do not go up commensurately to make them possible. We have had an intelligent debate so far. It has concentrated almost exclusively on schools, but it is a little-known fact that children’s social care is an important part of the Department for Education, which comes within the scope of today’s debate, so I want to raise a few issues on this.

Meg Hillier: One of the challenges is that, while this is a policy responsibility for the Department for Education, the funding goes through the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and directly to local authorities. This is one of the instances in which the Government need to work together and not succumb to cost-shunting, where cuts in one area can have an impact on children’s achievement elsewhere.

Tim Loughton: The hon. Lady is absolutely right, and it is of course the local authorities that get the blame for not delivering the goods, even though we have not been giving them the money to do so in certain cases. There are also huge differentials in the way in which those local authorities use their money.

On children’s social care, I would like to hear more about sufficiency funding, which the Chair of the Education Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), mentioned, and also about a 10-year plan. Children’s most important years are the ones before they go to school—those years will shape their careers in school and beyond more than anything else—so, for goodness’ sake, if we cannot have a 10-year plan for the social care needs of our children as they grow up, what can we have one for?

I am not going to have time to talk about schools today—I shall have to reserve those comments for the debate on Monday—but I just want to make the point that all the ongoing cost pressures on schools are going to be compounded by the recent directive from the Department for Education that was sent to schools on 6 February recommending a 2% pay rise for teachers this year. That is fine, but the Department’s report stated that “a pay increase for teachers of 2%, in line with forecast inflation, is affordable within the overall funding available to schools for 2019 to 2020, without placing further pressure on school budgets.” I am afraid that is just not the case. School budgets are under huge pressure, certainly in my constituency and elsewhere in West Sussex, where we have been at the bottom of the pile for funding for many years.
The cumulative effect of that underfunding means that there is no fat left to cut. All the savings have been made, so even a 2% increase in teachers’ pay, if it is to be paid for by the schools, will have enormous impacts on those school budgets’ ability to provide all the other services, which I will go into in detail in the debate on Monday.

On children’s services, a report commissioned by Action for Children, the National Children’s Bureau, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, the Children’s Society and Barnardo’s has come out today, and it confirms what we all know about the huge shortfalls in funding for children’s social care. That shortfall was also identified in the work that the all-party parliamentary group on children did in the report “Storing Up Trouble” that we produced last year. It is estimated that there will be a £3 billion funding gap by 2025. One of the alarming observations in today’s report is that spending on early intervention services for children and young people fell from £3.7 billion to £1.9 billion between 2010-11 and 2017-18. That is a 49% decrease in spending on early intervention. At the same time, local authority spending on late intervention services for children and young people has risen from £5.9 billion to £6.7 billion—a 12% increase.

This is not rocket science. If we do not spend early to prevent the problems from happening to these children, we will pay for it later. We will pay for it socially—most importantly—and also financially. It is such a false economy not to do more in those early years around perinatal mental health, around child neglect and around making children ready for school, for growing up and for society generally. Some of the biggest falls in spending have been in some of the most deprived authorities in the country, where the impact can be greater because the other support services, including family support services, are not available to help those children.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I have been in this House for eight and a half years. When I retired as deputy leader of Gateshead Council, it had an annual revenue account of £310 million, but now, eight and a half years later, it is down to £200 million despite the huge growth needs built into the system in Gateshead.

Tim Loughton: Well, I have been here for 22 years, and I have also seen a thing or two.

When I was a Minister at the Department for Education, we came up with the early intervention budget because we were seeing the problem coming. It alarmed me that early intervention is seen as a luxury add-on rather than an essential part of everything that we should be doing for our children, and we should be planning for it over the long term. That is why, for all the reasons I have set out, I am pleased to see—I know that the Minister for Children supports this work—the inter-ministerial working party led by the Leader of the House trying to co-ordinate early years activities across Government.

Turning to schools, the big figures that we talk about in these reports—the big percentage increases—are meaningless until we translate them into their impact on the frontline. I have spent the past couple of years getting all the heads from all the schools in my constituency and all the chairs of governors together to ask them about the impact of funding challenges on their schools. I asked not what might happen, but what is happening now. I wrote a seven-page letter to the Secretary of State for Education with the findings from all those schools, which included impacts as a result of not replacing staff or replacing them with less expensive and therefore less qualified staff, of having to remove things from the curriculum, and of doing away with out-of-school visits. Alarmingly, counselling services have also been reduced—almost to zero in some cases—at a time when we all know the effect of mental health stresses on the younger generation. The Government have recognised that, and work is ongoing, but if people are not on hand in schools to help with the stresses and strains that lead to mental health problems, that will just store up expensive problems, both financially and socially, for children in those schools.

We have been generous and have planned for the long term in the national health service, and it is essential not to neglect early long-term planning in a preventive way for our babies, toddlers, children and young people. It is a complete false economy not to be doing that. While I appreciate the additional money that the Government have been putting in, I am afraid that the estimates that we are looking at today, when they are factored down to the impact that they will have in authorities such as mine in West Sussex, which has had severe underfunding for so many years, will have a detrimental effect on the life chances of our children. Frankly, we have to do better, or we will be picking up a much more expensive and complicated bill further down the line.

4.3 pm

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): I am proud to have supported the request for today’s debate that was co-ordinated by my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) and the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran).

A report published last week by the Resolution Foundation predicted that the proportion of children in relative poverty could hit 37% by 2023. Low pay and cuts to welfare have hit and will continue to hit the most disadvantaged families the hardest, and I know all about that as a former headteacher of a school with a Sure Start centre on site. Not only does poverty affect a child’s experiences, but it is significant in determining their life chances. In education, the attainment gap between the most disadvantaged children and their peers is visible by the age of five, and it continues on throughout their childhood, potentially leading to poorer qualifications and difficulties in employment later in life.

As stated in the Education Committee’s report on life chances, the Government’s strategy on early years lacks direction. If the number of children in poverty is rising, the early years workforce needs to be equipped with the support and resources to be the first line of defence in improving children’s life chances and to work on early intervention, as mentioned by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton). What is the Department doing to anticipate those challenges, rather than responding in the midst of a crisis when it is much harder and more costly to fix? In addition, funding pressures on local authorities and services have led to reduced support for children and families. Too often, schools take on the burden of providing that support.
As a former teacher and headteacher, I understand their drive to do whatever they can to help their pupils, but I also see the pressure that schools and teachers are already under from their workloads and funding cuts. Some 95% of schools in my Colne Valley constituency are facing a shortfall compared with funding levels in 2015-16, and 67% of schools in my constituency have lost over £150 per pupil—seven are losing over £400 per pupil. Just think what could be done for each individual child with that money.

My constituency has had a cumulative shortfall of over £5.5 million since 2015, while pupil numbers have risen by more than 800. At my last meeting with Colne Valley headteachers, they told me that the situation has led to cuts in staffing, resources and provision overall. They also talked about the difficulties in SEND provision due to a lack of child and adolescent mental health services and a lack of funding for the delivery of education, health and care plans.

Those headteachers said that their teachers are suffering from stress due to not being able to provide children with the support that their experience and professional awareness tell them is necessary. Let us listen to the professionals. Mounting workloads, rising class sizes and an ever-growing list of responsibilities have pushed classroom teachers to work a 60-hour week. All of that hard work is rewarded by stagnating wages.

It is therefore no surprise that teachers young and old, the recently qualified and those with years of experience, are leaving the profession. The number of teachers leaving exceeded the number joining in 2017, which shows just how serious the crisis is. Let us listen to the teachers. I am delighted that 1.9 million more children in 2010 are being taught in good and outstanding schools—this has increased from 66% to 84%.

This is a debate in anticipation of the Government’s spending review, and although it is not only about money, money is inevitably an important factor. Let me start with the bits that I very much support and welcome. I welcome the introduction of the national funding formula, which is supported by a not insignificant £1.3 billion across 2018-19 and 2019-20. I welcome the fact that the Government protected the schools budget up to 2016, where just how serious this crisis is. I welcome the fact that the core school funding budget will rise from £41 billion in 2017-18 to £42 billion this year and £43.5 billion in 2019-20.

One of the most enjoyable parts of being an MP is attending assemblies, which I do regularly on Friday mornings, and listening to not only teachers and headteachers but parents, governors and, indeed, pupils. I wish I could hear what they think and how they tell us about the role here and how it impacts on them. I suppose this is a good juncture to pay tribute to all the teachers and the amazing schools we have in Colchester. Having met those teachers, headteachers, governors and parents, I find that we are asking our schools to do more than ever before and that is putting unbelievable pressure on teachers—I see that at home, but I also understand it from having spoken to teachers from across the schools in the constituency.

Schools are facing unprecedented cost pressures, and I wish to touch on a few of them because the context of the pressures schools are under is important when we talk about additional funding in education budgets. These cost pressures include providing support and intervention for children with specific learning difficulties; mental health issues; employer pension contributions; the national living wage; academies and multi-academy trusts potentially having less bargaining power than local authorities used to in terms of economies of scale; the costs that came with the general data protection rule; the rising cost of utilities; the apprenticeship levy; the growing cost of appeals; the costs of changing to multi-academy trusts; staff development; staff recruitment; and of course the teachers’ pay award. I have just touched on a few of the many rising cost pressures on schools.
In the short time available, I wish to touch on further education, which I genuinely believe is verging on crisis. For 16 and 17-year-olds, funding has been frozen at £4,000 per student since 2013, and for 18-year-olds, it has been frozen at £3,300 since 2014. As I just mentioned, colleges and sixth forms are not immune to all those different cost rises and more, and the Government have imposed a range of new requirements. Costs have risen sharply and the budget has not risen to reflect that. That is not good for students; it is damaging our international competitiveness; and it harms social mobility.

The Secretary of State is no longer in his place, but the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills is. They will know, because I have lobbied them both on this issue on numerous occasions, that I believe that schools have already maximised the efficiency savings that were available to them. A toolkit was helpfully provided by the Department, and schools have used it and gone even further. I genuinely believe that there is no more fat left to trim, and I do not want our headteachers focusing on how they can further squeeze their budgets; I want them focusing on educational attainment and improving outcomes for students in all our schools.

So I do have some asks. I know the Minister has heard them before, but I do not apologise for repeating them. We do need an increase in the revenue budget and in the high-needs budget. The rate for 16 to 19-year-old pupils must increase. The national funding formula needs to be rolled out and implemented in full as soon as possible. Funding settlements should be for a minimum of three years. We cannot expect schools to produce three-year budgets but not give them that certainty and consistency in their funding. We have to increase the capital budget for our schools.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Does my hon. Friend think it odd that the NHS has a budget for 10 years, local government has a budget for three years and yet schools have a budget for only one year?

Will Quince: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He reads my mind, because I was just about to say that we need a long-term plan for education and schools, in the same way that we have one for our NHS. This is absolutely the right thing to do, because teachers and headteachers need that certainty and consistency. We also need to ensure that mental and physical health services are adequately resourced.

I genuinely believe that we are on the precipice. The vast majority of any school budget—anywhere between 80% and 90%—is spent on people. They are the asset in our education system. If there is no more fat to trim, and I do not want our headteachers focusing on how they can further squeeze their budgets; I want them focusing on educational attainment and improving outcomes for students in all our schools.

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I genuinely believe that we are on the precipice. The vast majority of any school budget—anywhere between 80% and 90%—is spent on people. They are the asset in our education system. If there is no more fat to trim, the only place left to go is to reduce staff, and that will have a detrimental impact on pupils’ attainment and, indeed, outcomes across the board. There are already schools in Colchester that are letting support staff go and not filling vacancies. My fear is that if that continues, we will start to see a decline in results.

I wholeheartedly believe that education is at the heart of equality of opportunity. I believe in social mobility, and education is its key enabler. Education is an investment in our people. I will continue to lobby for additional funding for education and ask that the education budget is increased in all the areas I have mentioned ahead of the next spending review.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince).

The West of England combined authority, which includes my Bristol South constituency, is one of the areas currently producing a local industrial strategy in a bid to help to boost productivity. Early analysis of the evidence base for the strategy has shown gaps in educational and training provision compared with future business needs and that the job market does not work well for all residents, particularly those with low or no formal qualifications. The attainment gap is larger in the west of England than nationally, with 16 to 17-year-olds more likely not to be in education, employment or training, and there is significant inequality across the geographical area. These inequalities in education need to be addressed to improve future productivity. The local industrial strategy will be successful only if it is inclusive and supports opportunities, but how will that be achieved? I will confine my remarks to the policy areas that I think are critical to reducing inequality and improving social mobility: early years, further education and apprenticeships.

The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) gave a good summary of the need to support early years education. The evidence base is strongly in favour of high-quality education between birth and the age of five, as has been well established for a number of years. I am a former governor of one of Bristol’s many nursery school and children’s centre settings that has education, not social work or childcare, as its core purpose. As a former member of the Public Accounts Committee, I remember when we looked into the entitlement to free early years education. We saw strong evidence for the sector but recognised that it was not stable and that local authorities needed more support. Local authorities and, indeed, the Department for Education had no real mechanism for identifying what was happening in the sector or whether it was being managed well.

The Education Committee and the Treasury Committee are looking into the provision of the additional childcare element, but we need somehow to get the Government to look across Departments and join up the policy objectives and the money so that we can be clear about what is wanted from the sector. I recently met some of my local headteachers, some of whom have been teaching for 30 years, and they have never seen so much of their workload given over to picking up the crises families are going through. The question for the Department is what is its early years policy objective and how is it going to get to grips with it and with the local government cuts that are having such an effect, particularly on the maintained sector.

Several colleagues have spoken about further education, which is absolutely the other key driver of social mobility. It offers everyone a second chance and the opportunity of lifelong learning that the economy and individuals need. The funding cuts to post-16 education have been really quite severe, particularly since 2010. FE funding has been the hardest hit since that peak, resulting in closures, job losses and, critically, cuts to the student numbers that are needed so much. The post-16 transition time is vital. We really need to get to the point where we consider that point as important as the transition into school and the transition from primary into secondary
education. The cuts to further education are a barrier to that happening, so I absolutely support the call to increase the funding rates for 16 to 18-year-olds.

I support the letter of the chief inspector of schools to the Public Accounts Committee in which she, too, supported the increase in the base and a welcome look at the accountability across the different bodies that are involved in further education to try to improve their performance, to improve what they are trying to do and to share information.

The Public Accounts Committee also looked at the sustainability of the sector. The area reviews are coming to an end, and I do hope that the Committee will look again at what is happening in this sector. We have seen some good leadership in this sector with regard to financial sustainability, but, again, I ask the question: what does the Department want to achieve for its money in further education? I worry about whether the sector has been made financially sustainable and what on earth we are left with in terms of the teaching in some of those settings to help on that productivity and skills gap, which is so crucial.

When the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) was a Minister, he came to Bristol South, looking at the importance of a good further education provider in a constituency such as mine, which has many similarities to Harlow in terms of supporting young people into those better opportunities.

I support part of what the Government are trying to do with apprenticeships, because of the post-16 situation in my constituency. Since becoming an MP, I have championed apprenticeships as a route, or a ladder, to greater opportunities. I am about to hold my third apprenticeships and jobs fair on Thursday. This year, I have managed to work with the council and the Department for Work and Pensions to cohere the work that is being done in my constituency around the people of Bristol South. I hope that the fair is again a great success. Again, we are not seeing the apprenticeship policy really doing what it needs to do to improve life chances.

In conclusion, we have a good overview on this matter. Again, I thank the National Audit Office for its briefing—I went to one this morning. We know what the Department is spending its money on, but we are not really clear about its objectives and about how it is achieving better outcomes for young people. We are also clear that we have a skills gap, a productivity problem and a population who are desperate to fill those jobs, which can give them better life chances. The Department’s vision is to prioritise support particularly for disadvantaged people in disadvantaged areas, but, I am afraid, it is not working in my constituency. I am keen to work with the Government to make sure that it improves.

4.21 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I welcome today’s debate. Already, we have heard a whole range of broad themes around education, including, importantly, how we can support and improve the life chances of our young people. It is pretty obvious that the Department has a wide range of responsibilities to secure the delivery of high quality education that meets the needs of our young people and our country. It is right that, over the years, we have seen a focus on rigour in the system and, importantly, that we have ensured that our children and young people are supported and that they get the right kind of care, skill and support to enhance their opportunities and their life chances.

I welcome the fact that, since 2010, there are now 1.9 million more pupils being taught in schools that are rated “good” or “outstanding” by Ofsted. That represents about 86% of all pupils. The fact is, however, no Government, and no Government policy on education, can ever stand still. As we have already heard from friends and colleagues—hon. and right hon. Members—as part of the comprehensive spending review it is important that the Government consider how schools, education providers and local authorities are funded for the services that they provide.

We have also heard about care today—care for young people. Care is provided not just by our schools, but through local authorities. It is a fact that many of our local authorities are strapped for cash and challenged with many other pressures. Education stands at the foundations of our country, and it is, of course, where our next generation comes from in terms not just of our labour market, but of our citizens. It is our duty to equip them with the right kind of skills and to ensure that they have every opportunity when it comes to making a success of their future.

Like many Members, I have many excellent examples in my constituency of outstanding leaders, teachers, education providers, schools and academies. All of them are pioneering and innovating. In the Witham constituency, we have the remarkable Connected Learning Multi-Academy Trust. It is headed up by a remarkable former headteacher called Mrs Jane Bass. The success of that trust is quite phenomenal in the way in which it has turned around failing schools that were within the local authority’s remit. It has done that through demonstrating leadership and providing resource, sometimes with disagreements with the local authority on funding. We have all had to fight alongside our headteachers and our schools to really make sure that they can bring in the resources. Many hon. Members have highlighted what academy conversion does to enhance schools’ financial resources too. School improvement plans also play an important role in turning around many schools that are not performing. That, again, is where resources are needed.

I want to touch on a couple of issues with academies and academy trusts. My right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards and, I think, everybody in the Department is fully aware of the Academies Enterprise Trust and the historical issues that have been associated with it. I urge Ministers never to take their eye off the ball with regard to governance. The governing structures of some these rather big multi-academy trusts—in the case of the AET, one of the fastest growing trusts in the country—did not have the necessary oversight and accountability, and that then led to problems with school exclusions and other wider issues. That is only one of the trusts covering not just my constituency but neighbouring areas too.

Many parts of our communities and constituencies are experiencing considerable population growth. We are now looking at new developments in Witham town and in areas such as Stanway that come under the Colchester borough where we are seeing new investment in schools, which is the right thing to do.
Only a week ago, we were speaking in Westminster Hall about another issue that has been raised today—financial support for children with special education needs. I do not want to go over many of the points that have been covered already. The governance reforms are welcome, as is the new 2015 SEND code of practice, which is vital. At the same time, however, the introduction of the education, health and care plans is leading to a much greater increase in demand, complexity in particular cases, and, unsurprisingly, pressures on local government and authority funding. Essex County Council has experienced exactly this. Yes, there has been more resource from the Government centrally, and in Essex that equates to over £3 million a year for the county council, but we still have pressures. For example, issues around the transfer of the block grant for schools from the county council are causing tensions locally.

There are many other issues around skills, apprenticeships and support for young people, but for the purposes of this debate we should say that we pride ourselves, as a country and a nation, on our education system. It is absolutely right that we all collectively work together to do more to provide the aspiration, hope and opportunity that will support the life chances of young people in our country.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. In order to be able to get everybody in, I am going to have to cut the time limit to five minutes.

4.27 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I thank the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) for bringing forward this incredibly important debate. I want to emphasise and add my voice to the concerns that many Members on both sides of the House have raised about the financial pressures facing so many of our schools.

The reason I wanted to take part in this debate is that schools in my constituency are literally at desperation point—and we know why. Mainstream schools have seen their general budgets savaged by 8% real-terms cuts since 2010. So when Ministers say that they are spending more, we know that that is not true, per pupil in real terms. In fact, it is a thinly veiled attempt to gloss over very real, serious and damaging cuts. That is demonstrated by the stark results of a recent survey of approximately 2,000 headteachers. One of the questions put to them was, “Do you trust what the Department for Education says about overall school budgets and the financial situation of your school?” Shockingly, fewer than 1% gave the answer, “I trust what the DFE says about school budgets.” Ministers cannot ignore that, or the other shocking results such as 80% reporting that teachers in their schools were contributing their own money to buy resources for their pupils to use. In addition, 86% said that recruitment and retention of teachers is getting harder, and 87% disagreed with the statement, “Any additional revenue or cash received in the financial year 2018-19 has been greater than additional costs in the same period.”

All that evidence and those abstract figures are borne out by the reality in our schools up and down the country. Headteachers in Brighton are writing to me in desperate terms. They face sleepless nights because of the impact of the funding crisis on their ability to support pupils, particularly those with complex needs. Schools have to manage delayed education, health and care plans, as well as crippling pressures on local authority budgets. The LGA has identified a potential £1.6 billion deficit for special needs education, and yet the Government have responded with an inadequate £350 million. Headteachers say that that is too little too late and does not even cover local authority high needs shortfalls, which simply exacerbate the problems with mainstream SEND.

For example, teachers in my constituency say that the very successful Every Child a Reader scheme for SEND children can no longer be funded because their schools simply do not have the money. I have had so many letters saying that schools are having to drop crucial counsellor services and so on. There is real concern. I am grateful that the Secretary of State has said that he will meet a delegation from Brighton to discuss this issue, but it goes right across the country.

In the short time I have, I want to say a few words about sixth-form funding. There are so many areas of concern in education funding, but the pressures on post-16 funding are huge. I have two fantastic sixth-form colleges in my constituency—Brighton Hove and Sussex Sixth-form College, or BHASVIC, and Varndean—and an amazing FE college, the MET. They all feel massively under pressure because they do not have enough funding. Those concerns are, again, backed up by the statistics. London Economics found that in real terms, sixth-form colleges received £1,380 less per student in 2016-17 than in 2010-11. That is a 22% decline in funding. The IFS was also clear, saying that funding per student aged 16 to 18 has seen the “biggest squeeze” at all stages of education for young people in recent years.

At the same time, costs have risen. Students’ needs have become more complex, and the Government are asking more of schools and colleges. The purchasing power of sixth-form funding has been greatly diminished as a result. A recent funding impact survey by the Sixth Form Colleges Association makes shocking reading. It found that 50% of schools and colleges have dropped courses in modern foreign languages as a result of funding pressures; 34% have dropped STEM courses; a huge 67% have reduced student support services; 94% have reduced extracurricular activities, with significant cuts to mental health support, employability skills and careers advice; and 77% are teaching students in larger class sizes.

The only way to address the funding crisis in 16-to-18 education is to raise the rate paid per student. Sixth forms can respond to the Treasury’s “something for something” mantra. An increase to the funding rate of at least £760 per student would have specific outcomes. It is the amount needed to provide student support services at the required level, to protect subjects at risk of being dropped, such as modern foreign languages, and to increase vital extracurricular activities such as work experience and university visits. I will conclude by echoing what others have said: these cuts are hugely counter-productive because they mount up and will mean bigger cuts in the future.

4.33 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): It is a great pleasure to be the tail-end Charlie in this high-quality debate and to follow the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas).
I should declare an interest: I come from a family of teachers. In fact, my elder son is now a teacher too. What comes with that is a commitment to not only visiting schools but engaging with them, as well as with our further education college—the outstanding Gloucestershire College—and the University of Gloucestershire. I also ought to refer to the newest university in the country, Hartpury University, in the constituency of my neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper). They all have masses to offer lots of people with skills and interests in various sectors.

This debate focuses on estimates and therefore inevitably on money. However, it is encouraging that the debate has been about not only what an Opposition spokesman in an earlier debate called “growing the cake” but improving the cake. How do we get the outcomes that are obviously affected by the input of money but where the relationship is not absolute? What really makes the difference?

I ask myself that a lot because in my constituency we have outstanding primary schools in areas that would be considered economically deprived, such as Tredworth, Coney Hill, Robinswood and Finlay Community School, which is on the verge of outstanding. Coney Hill is in fact rated the fourth best primary school in the county of Gloucestershire, and the second best is Field Court, also in my constituency, which is in a slightly more affluent part of the city. We therefore know that it can be done, and schools that have succeeded, such as Coney Hill, have not done so because they get a great deal more money.

It seems to me that the challenge for us as MPs is how to know what does make a difference. How can we be sure about what a school needs and whether it is getting enough of it? How can each school—every one of which will claim, and they may be right, that they have cut to the bone in order to make sure that every penny is used effectively—know how good they are as against other schools? How can we compare them, and how can we see how good they are at managing the business of a school, as well as being an outstanding place of learning for all the pupils there?

In this sense, of course, the statistics do not always help to shed light. The IFS, an independent body, tells us that the funding for five to 16-year-olds will have gone up by 50% in real terms from 2010 to 2020. If I translate this into a local figure, Gloucestershire schools will be getting 3.1% more in 2019, but salaries have increased by 3.5% and there are the pension increases as well. I deduce from that that this is an issue not of enough of it—that is a very easy word to use, particularly in opposition—but of costs growing faster than the increases that schools, further education colleges and universities are getting from the Government. That is the challenge for heads and others who are running schools.

In a debate in Westminster Hall at the end of January on education in Gloucestershire, the Minister for School Standards referred to a number of things that the Government are doing to try to help schools with the issues I have mentioned. They include the schools buying club, the schools commercial team, the DFE schools buying strategy, a pilot project in the south-west of England at which 39 schools in Gloucestershire are registered, a focus on supply teachers and agency workers costs, and a benchmarking website. All these things sound very encouraging, but I sense—the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills will be able to shed light on this—that not all of these are really up and running or are easy-to-access tools for us or the heads of the schools.

I turn now to further education funding, which is of course the worst part for funding in the education sector, despite all that has been done with the new national colleges, T-levels, the investment in apprenticeships and so on. The fundamental fact we have to deal with is that we are in the bottom quartile for OECD skills, at level 4 or 5, for the education of our apprentices and others. At level 4 or 5, we are really way below where we should be in terms of the numbers studying. The letter I wrote with my colleague the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) to the Chancellor focused on the fact that, of all the areas in education that need funding, we really are looking for more for boost productivity and to boost what our young people can give. As 165 Members signed that letter, I urge the Minister to consider it.

4.38 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham).

Many people have made incredibly important points about the cuts in so many different areas—FE, schools and children’s services—but I would like to focus my contribution on how the cuts are affecting children with special educational needs and disabilities. Among the written evidence given to our Education Committee inquiry on SEND, there is a really useful summary from the Devon SEND Improvement Board, which said:

“The level of funding for SEND provision remains insufficient to meet increasing demand and puts significant pressure on existing budgets. Local authority, NHS and High Needs Block budgets have not grown to reflect the increasing demand for EHCPs and specialist provision. Tension related to funding is directly affecting parental relationships with professionals and organisations. The increase in general costs is affecting schools’ ability to support increasing SEN needs for example increases in national insurance contributions and the rise in living wage, with no additional funding to cover these increases.”

I am not sure about everyone else in the House, but certainly the concern that stands out for me is the tension affecting parental relationships, which is something I am hearing about in my surgeries and in all the evidence given to the Education Committee. Parents relate having to fight the system in order to get the support their child needs. That point was made a number of times.

One of the more worrying pieces of evidence, submitted by Christine Lenehan, is that in some special schools 100% of the children attending are there only because their parents were able to fight through tribunal. She said that is actually a class issue, because it is white, middle-class parents who are able to go to a tribunal and know how to work the system and where to get support. What about all those children whose parents do not have the same cultural capital to go out there and fight for them? They are not in these residential special schools, so where are they and what is happening to them?

Jean Gross mentioned the lack of interventions and support for children with SEND. She talked about the lack of speech and language therapies. I am sorry, but that is also a class issue. I know from parents in my
contributions to national insurance and teachers' pension schemes, and rising costs. There is an urgent need for a better commitment from the Government, because these issues become even more pronounced when we focus on sixth-form and further education spending, tuition fees and academies. We know that in the next six years there will be a 19% increase in pupil numbers in England. The hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch highlighted that it is not enough to just increase education funding, as has been mentioned by a number of hon. Members on the Government Benches. We know that the budget is increasing, but it has to be a per-pupil increase in spending to have any impact.

I would just like to mention academies. We do not have academies in Scotland. In England, they were hailed as a way forward and a remedy for failing schools. At first, it looked as though that was the case, because money and resources were thrown at them. However, we now see a disturbing situation where some high-performing and improving academies are accepting fewer children from disadvantaged backgrounds or pupils with additional support needs. Surely that cannot be considered a success. Pupils with special educational needs must be properly catered for. If they are not being catered for within the academy system, there has to be greater spending on them in maintained schools and that increase must be significant. We are not talking about a small increase in per-pupil spending: if they have been taken out of the academy programme, we have to put serious investment into them in other schools.

On academies, the teaching profession in England has experienced an attack on terms and conditions, including the ability of school leaders to bypass nationally agreed pay scales. That allows schools to stretch budgets further or ensure huge pay awards to the chief executives of multi-academy trusts without, it seems, any scrutiny. Essentially, Department for Education funding has been syphoned off to pay individuals, regardless of the success of the academy itself. According to the Education Policy Institute, there is little measureable difference between the performance of academies and local authority schools. Underperformance in academy trusts, including a lack of diversity in the pupil cohort, must be challenged, as should academy trusts that are paying excessive salaries to CEOs, a point highlighted by the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel).

A number of hon. Members talked about post-16 funding, including the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) and, in particular, the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds). We know that since 2010 this funding has been cut sharply. The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) talked about the 22% cut in funding that has damaged the variety of courses, the number of STEM courses offered and the provision of extra curricular activities, and has resulted in larger class sizes.

Given the hardship that further education colleges are having to cope with, it is little surprise that Ofsted’s annual report concluded:

“We are concerned about the financial sustainability of the college sector, and the clear impact that real-term cuts to Further Education funding can have on provision.”

A long-term overhaul of post-16 education in England is needed. Courses must be linked specifically to needs in the labour market. We regularly hear rhetoric about positive destinations for young people, and how we have
to value all types of education and all outcomes for young people, but increasing the budget for further education is only a part of that. We also have to make sure that courses are properly tailored to needs in the job market. Brexit will make this issue even more acute, so England really should be looking at what we are doing in Scotland. In Scotland, we are ensuring that college places are actually linked directly to employment requirements, and we have the highest number of young people going on to positive destinations.

One issue that has not been mentioned this afternoon is tuition fees, but I think it is important if we are talking about budgets. We estimate that £23.4 billion is expected to be paid out in student loans this year, with capital repayments amounting to only £1.1 billion. As became apparent last December, these huge tuition fees betray a staggeringly short-term perspective that has added £12 billion to our national debt.

Up until now, it suited the Government to pretend that student debts are genuine loans, but it is now clear that many graduates will never earn enough to pay off these loans in full, which will result in the Government effectively having to pay the loans off. Why continue to put these pressures on students? Why not look at proper funding of our courses in higher education?

In conclusion, education funding must serve young people regardless of their background or educational needs. We must ensure that 16 to 19-year-olds are properly catered for. Funding must be adequate to ensure that young people avoid a lifetime of debt, and finally, meagre education budgets should not be siphoned off to line the pockets of rich businesspeople in academy trusts.

4.50 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): What a fantastic debate we have had this afternoon. I congratulate all the many colleagues from across the House on their contributions to the debate and, of course, the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), on opening it. I also take this opportunity to give my best wishes to Sally Hunt, the general secretary of the University and College Union, who has retired this week on health grounds. I wish her all the best for the future.

I would like to echo some of the points that many Members around the Chamber have made today and start by paying tribute to all the educators in our schools and educational establishments across England. They do a fantastic job to educate the next generation and to feed our economy with the skills that we require. It can often seem in this place as though we are all preoccupied with Brexit, but hearing from so many hon. Members across the House and across the country: the desperate shortage of funding for our schools. The hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) said that every child in this country deserves the chance to thrive, and on that, I absolutely agree with him. I also agree with his contributions about school exclusions, which I hope the Minister will address.

Let me turn to the issue that we have heard raised time and again in these debates, including today, from Members across the House and across the country: the desperate shortage of funding for our schools. The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) said, the Department’s estimate is down by £12 billion. For once, that is a reflection not of cuts, but of the accounting change that means that it can no longer pretend that every pound of student loans is paid off. Can the Minister tell us how much additional funding will be needed to continue the current system, and will that be provided? She will know the alarm that universities have expressed about some of the leaked discussions around higher education funding.

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Last year, the Secretary of State told us that every school “will see at least a small cash increase.”—[Official Report, 29 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 536.]

In the spring statement, the Chancellor gave the House a guarantee that every school would receive a cash increase. Will the Minister tell us whether that guarantee will still be honoured?

The hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) spoke about her concerns with the national funding formula and cuts to her local schools, as did the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas). Of course, the Chancellor had something else to say about schools in the last Budget: he offered them “little extras”—enough funding for them to buy a couple of whiteboards. Schools have lost billions of pounds and now they are offered a whiteboard! I hope that the hon. Members for Colchester (Will Quince) and for Gloucester (Richard Graham) are not on the naughty step at home, following their contributions today. Of course, the Education Secretary has promised that he would ask for at least some of those billions back. As my hon. Friend the Minister for Redcar (Anna Turley) outlined, our schools desperately need the money now.

The right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel) and the hon. Member for Colchester brought up the stat of 1.9 million pupils in good or outstanding schools, but I caution hon. Members: more pupils are in our schools and some of those schools have not been inspected for years. On league tables, I do not think that talking...
about so-called “failing schools” is helpful for the teachers who deliver excellence in their classrooms in those schools every single day. My school would have been a “failing school”, but I do not think my school failed me—or I would not be stood at this Dispatch Box today, doing the things I do with the resilience that I have.

We are reaching the last financial year of the additional school funding announced in 2017. Will the Minister tell us whether there is any sign of that new funding from the Treasury? Children with special educational needs need the help most, and they are not getting it. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) raised the heart-breaking experience of parents and their children in need of additional support and the inequalities they face in the system. Despite the Prime Minister’s words, austerity is far from over in education. Ministers have told us for years that they are protecting school budgets, yet our analysis of the Institute for Fiscal Studies data found that school funding in real terms will be £1.7 billion lower in 2020 than it was in 2015. The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) was right to highlight the pressures on the system and the need for the focus on outcomes and to crack down on the financial scandals and lack of oversight in some trusts.

Finally, I would like to address the early years. I welcome the Health and Social Care Committee report published today. I hope the Minister agrees that early years support can transform lives for the better. Yet across the country, children’s centres are closing, nurseries are under threat, childcare is underfunded and the shambolic roll-out of tax-free childcare left an underspend of around £1 billion. I hope that the Minister will agree that Sure Start centres desperately need that money.

The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) was absolutely right to raise children’s services, the pressures that they face and the fantastic work they do every single day, and to link that to the report out today from Action for Children.

This is an important debate, and I am glad that we have had it on the Floor of the House. But our children’s services, nurseries, schools, colleges and universities need not words, but actions. Investment in education is an investment in our collective future.

4.59 pm

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): I thank the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) for securing the debate. I can assure her that I will not resort to smoke and mirrors. That is not really my style. I will not necessarily be able to give her all the specific details about the money that I think she will want to hear, but I will respond to a couple of her points.

The Secretary of State is extremely mindful of the problems involved in asking schools to do more. He is determined to ensure that we do what we can to help them to manage their budgets and their workload. The hon. Lady mentioned high needs. An additional £250 million will be invested in 2019-20, and we are looking at some of the perverse incentives that currently exist, especially considering that first £6,000 that schools are asked to pay. The hon. Lady raised the issue of asbestos exposure and capital budgets. The impact of asbestos in buildings on health, and the changes and challenges that it poses, are quite complex, but I welcome her comments about the schools survey that we have undertaken. The Department has established an asbestos working group, which includes the Health and Safety Executive, to address some of those problems.

A total of £23 billion has been provided for capital spending over five years—between 2016-17 and 2020-21—and we are on track to create 1 million new school places during the current decade. That will be the biggest expansion for two generations, and it contrasts with the loss of places between 2004 and 2010. Between 2010 and 2017, 825,000 additional places were created; that includes 90,000 in 2016-17 alone. I should add that 97.7% of families received offers from one of their three top primary school choices, and 91% received offers from their first choices. Those are important figures, because that is what matters to parents.

I will respond to some of the most pressing points that have been raised, but I should first point out that in 2018-19 the Department’s resource budget is about £79 billion. Of that, £18 billion is for higher and further education, £55 billion is for early years and schools, and £0.3 billion is for social care, mobility and disadvantage.

I welcome the contribution of the Education Committee, and the work of the Chairman, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), has been particularly valuable. He is right to remind the House that putting in more money does not necessarily equate to better outcomes. It is not as simple as that. Good outcomes are what matter, but good outcomes in themselves are not enough. We want excellent outcomes not only for those at school, but for those for whom school did not work. Many of them need a second, a third or even a fourth chance. I am, of course, delighted that my right hon. Friend raised the issue of further education, and I thank him for his kind comments.

My right hon. Friend talked about the importance of plans. It will certainly not be before time that we articulate a vision for further education, which is so often squeezed between the noises surrounding schools and universities. As my right hon. Friend rightly says, reducing inequalities in education has a wide impact, not least on people’s health—those who are better educated have better health—and it can also enable people to become socially mobile.

I was extremely pleased that the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) reiterated the need to reform all education, highlighting further education. I assure her that we are very aware of the issue of maintained nurseries. I am aware that their need to know the situation is very pressing.

Robert Halfon: Will the Minister give way?

Anne Milton: I do not have much time, so if my right hon. Friend will forgive me, I will not.

My hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) raised the issue of exclusions. We are not complacent, but I should point out that the number of exclusions reached a peak in 2008. The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) raised a specific issue about local schools and academies. I think it is a mistake always to blame structures, but I understand her underlying point about accountability, which is so important.
My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton)—although he was corrected slightly by the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee—raised the important issue of children’s social care. He drew attention to the key role that early years education and care play in the eventual outcomes for young people. He made a predictably powerful speech. I worked with him when I was in the Department of Health, and I am extremely pleased to see him continuing his excellent work, albeit from the Back Benches. I know he has also been a champion for his local schools and their funding, as indeed has my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), who reiterated similar issues. He raised one thing that has long been a bugbear of mine: the need for more certainty in budgets. He mentioned three-year rolling budgets, but whatever it is we are talking about something that gives organisations certainty.

I have already met the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) and she raised the issue of inequality and social mobility and the importance of local industrial strategies. She, like the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, highlighted the need for us to have an articulate and adequate clear vision for further education. I am sure she is aware that Bristol is one of the five cities in our “5 cities” project trying to increase diversity in apprenticeships. I met a woman recently in Bristol who demonstrated exactly what can be achieved through apprenticeships. [Interruption.] She was a single parent, and I am sorry hon. Members on the Opposition Front Bench find this amusing, but I found it very moving: she had been unemployed for 10 years and had a small child, and because of that project she had got a level 2 apprenticeship and was really proud of what she had achieved, and proud that her daughter was now proud of what her mother was doing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) has been a huge champion of further education and rightly pointed out the need for much greater emphasis on levels 4 and 5; we are looking at that at the moment. He also recognised the need to increase the number of people undertaking qualifications at that level.

I know the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) always tries to be helpful and it is always a pleasure to hear her contribution, and she rightly pointed out the inequalities that exist from those with sharp elbows fighting those tribunals.

We are investing an additional £1.6 billion in schools this year and next over and above the funding confirmed at the 2015 spending review. This significant additional investment means core funding for schools and high needs will rise from almost £41 billion in 2017 to £43.5 billion in ‘19-20.

We recognise the cost pressures that schools, nurseries and further education are under, but the Government have achieved a huge amount since 2010: 1.9 million more children are being taught in good or outstanding schools; the attainment gap between rich and poor pupils has shrunk by 10%; a record proportion of disadvantaged students are going to university; and we now have a truly world-class technical education offer through T-levels and high-quality apprenticeships. There is massive reform in apprenticeships which has a life-changing impact. There has also been £100 million into the national retraining scheme, a partnership between the Government, the TUC and the CBI.

I am a lucky Minister to be able to contribute to debates that are often so well considered and passionate and I will never cease to be grateful to all those involved in education at every level. We all want the same thing: that whoever you are, wherever you are born and whoever you know, everyone has the chance to get on in life, and get a rewarding career and a job.

We on the Government Benches will not play party political games with education, but put children, young people and adults and education first and foremost, and we will not shirk the difficult decisions sometimes needed to make sure we achieve that end. Party political rhetoric has no place in a debate like this; it is, as many Members have said, the outcomes for those we serve that matter. 5.8 pm

Meg Hillier: I rise very briefly to thank all hon. Members who have contributed and put in such detailed preparation and to thank again the NAO for its work.

It is important that we debate the money, because ultimately that is what then shapes how policy can be delivered, and I reiterate my points made at the beginning: that we must look at the money and talk about the right baselines—per-pupil funding, not vast global amounts on different year bases, because that gives a confusing message.

The Government need to look at every area of spending and assess how effective they are in delivering their outcomes. I may disagree with the outcomes, but it is right, as the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) said, that we focus on those outcomes.

I thank hon. Members for their contributions. This is not the end of this: the PAC will continuously look at education spending, value for money and outcomes, and I know the Select Committee on Education so ably chaired by the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) will do so as well. So the Minister will see a lot more of us, and I put the Secretary of State on alert that we will be poring over the numbers and challenging him at every step of the way to make sure he is getting as much value as possible for the taxpayer, for our pupils and for all those who work so hard in our education system from cradle to further education and higher education in order to deliver better outcomes for young people.

Question deferred, (Standing Order No. 54).
of rising spending and rising poverty, and so that we have the opportunity to suggest some answers for the Department to consider.

We know that £27 billion of that £31 billion increase in the Department’s spending relates to the state pension, with the triple lock and the single-tier pension delivering increased prosperity for most pensioners. That is good to see, but, as with many aspects of DWP spending, it does not tell the full story. While the state pension has increased, pensioner poverty has also increased. The rate of pensioners in poverty halved in the decade to 2013, but since then it has risen by 330,000 to 16% of pensioners. That change was partly due to reductions in pension credit, which now supports a million fewer pensioners, but also due to housing costs, which is a serious problem for the Department across the full range of benefit claimants.

The situation is worse for those who are not pensioners. The Institute for Fiscal Studies stated after the Budget that we will still see cuts of £4 billion a year to welfare spending on in-work age groups in the years to come. It is the particular and persistent focus on reducing spending that has played a major role in the increase in poverty, and destitution in particular. The emphasis on making welfare spending fairer to working people ignores the fact that the majority of claimants of state support are already in work. In the 2015 Budget the then Chancellor claimed that benefits should be frozen for four years because average wages had risen by only 11% while benefits had increased by 21% since 2008 due to high levels of inflation. The argument that real-term falls in wages should equate to even larger falls in the benefits on which so many in-work families rely fails to recognise the realities of life on low pay.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Ind): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. We have seen changes over the past few years, including increases in some pensioner benefits and in the national living wage, but the group of people who stand out more than any other are those on benefits. It is utterly unacceptable that we can even consider maintaining the benefits freeze for one final year. It has to go.

Ruth George: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention and pay tribute to her campaigning for people on benefits. I agree with the sentiment of her intervention, because over 10 million people are affected by the reality of the four-year freeze. When it was announced in 2015, inflation was just 0.4%, but it has been 2.3% and 2.6% in the past two years. Since the freeze’s introduction, the cost of living for people on low incomes has risen by £900 a year. In real terms, the income received by a single person on jobseeker’s allowance or income support of just £77 a week will fall by over £5 a week by 2020—a drop of £267 a year. When people on such benefits have less than £10 a week to spend on food, the loss of £5 makes a huge difference. Someone can just about eke out £10 a week for food, but eating for £5 a week is impossible. It is no wonder we are seeing such growth in the use of food banks.

For families, the freeze bites even harder. If it continues, low-income families are likely to lose out on an extra £210 a year due to inflation. If we see inflation rise because of disruption to trade or food tariffs or shortages, inflation for people on low incomes will be far higher.
If the benefits freeze ended a year early, that would provide an essential income boost to over 10 million people struggling on low incomes and reduce poverty for 200,000 people, so I strongly urge the Government to look at doing so as soon as possible.

Of course, welfare is in the process of being reformed, especially through universal credit. I worked for USDAW—the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers—for almost two decades, so I know just how vital in-work benefits are to millions of families who struggle to get by on low pay and often low hours. I know that UC was designed to fix such problems to ensure that work always pays, and I applaud that aim, but the stark reality is that universal credit has led to a 30% increase in referrals to food banks where it has been rolled out. I see families in my surgeries facing eviction, and I give credit to the thousands of people who are organising food banks across the country to help people who cannot afford enough to eat, but that is not good enough. Food banks cannot cover the whole country—I know that from my rural area—and they should not have to, either.

I pay tribute to fellow members of the Select Committee, which has made recommendations to the Government on universal credit, and to members of the all-party parliamentary group on universal credit which, with me as chair, is producing a report on a whole range of universal credit issues—I am pleased that the Secretary of State has already committed to meeting us about it.

I thank the Government for the improvements they have already made to universal credit, and I welcome those changes, but we are still seeing problems. Some 5.1 million people in working families will see their income reduced, on average, by £2,300 a year, and 1.3 million people in out-of-work families, with even lower incomes, will see those outcomes drop by £1,400 a year. At a time when persistent poverty and destitution are rising, the Government’s flagship policy should not be looking to take over 10% of our population even deeper into poverty.

**Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab):** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Ruth George:** I was asked to take 10 minutes, so I will have to wrap up soon. I am sure my hon. Friend will get a chance to speak.

I ask the Government to look urgently at three issues with universal credit. First, the five-week wait for payment puts people into debt right at the start of their claim, and the levels of universal credit are simply not enough to enable them to escape that debt. Secondly, the multiple deductions: people receive an advance, and they might have debts on top of that from tax credits, housing arrears or utility bills, and they end up with an income that they simply cannot live on. Thirdly, the support for children and adults with disabilities. This Government are proud of saying that they like to support the most vulnerable people but, as one of my constituents says, “If a six-year-old boy who is bedbound is not one of the most vulnerable and does not deserve support, who does?”

We need a system that treats people like human beings. Yes, it is down to money and, yes, it is down to support, and I welcome the Secretary of State’s commitment to personalised support, but that support needs people to implement it, not computers that simply say no and not processes like the one I raised in a Westminster Hall debate on carer’s allowance where carers are being taken to court under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 and are being forced to sell their homes because they have made an error.

We want to see investment in jobcentres and DWP staff so that they can deliver the personal support that they want to deliver, that this Government want to deliver and that we all want to see. This Department covers a huge range of people and complex issues. We all need to have trust that our welfare safety net is still there. It is the hallmark of a civilised society, and I look forward to this debate helping us to bring it in together.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Order. I thank the hon. Lady for her brevity, but it will be obvious to the House that we have little over an hour and a half left in the debate and that a great many people want to speak, so we have to start with a time limit of six minutes.

**5.23 pm**

**Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con):** It is a pleasure to speak in this debate on the spending of the Department for Work and Pensions. I thank the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) for leading the debate and for her speech.

I understand the issues that the hon. Lady raises, but, as a Conservative Member, I want to try to make a case for the positives since 2010. In doing so, I would not want it to be thought that I do not have constituents who have been let down by the system. We must always strive to do more and to learn from such issues, but the situation has existed for years under every Government—it has not only existed under this present Government.

I will touch on employment, universal credit and our work to help those with disabilities, sicknesses and impairments, all of which are so important because the Department is responsible for a quarter of all Government spending. A vast £215 billion is spent on benefits and pensions.

Employment is the greatest success of the Government that I have been supporting since 2010, as the unemployment rate has halved since then. The most important thing to me in my role of being an MP is to help people to find work, find hope over despair, find something to feel proud about and find something where they really contribute. It is about taking them from being people who rely on the benefits system when they do not want to do so and giving them a position where they are paying in to help others.

This has been a great success: we now have the highest numbers in employment since records began; we also have an unemployment level at 4%, which is as low as it has been since the early 1970s; youth unemployment has halved; female unemployment is at its lowest rate; and wages are now growing at their joint fastest rate in a decade.

I am particularly proud that our unemployment rate is half that of Eurozone countries. It is important to say that every Labour Government have left office with unemployment higher than when they took office. The unemployment rate rose from 2.1 million in 1997 to 2.5 million in 2010, whereas it has now fallen to 1.36 million.
Although there may still be matters that need addressing, this Government have reduced unemployment by 1 million and helped those people to find work and hope, so there is not that much of a stick to beat us with.

Let us look at universal credit, because it is part of our mantra of helping people into work.

Neil Coyle: Of course I will give way. The hon. Gentleman now has his chance.

Neil Coyle: If the hon. Gentleman wants us to provide a stick to beat the Conservatives with, he could try the National Audit Office report that said categorically that there is no evidence to suggest that UC has got anyone into work. So where is his evidence?

Huw Merriman: The evidence states that those on UC are more likely to find work and to increase their earnings—that has been found as well. The whole idea of course is that work pays. [Interruption.] The very fact that unemployment has gone down by 1 million suggests that UC is helping people into work. If the hon. Gentleman does not believe that helping people into work is the right thing to do and that we should keep people on benefits, we have indeed failed, but I happen to believe that ours is the right way forward.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): There is something I do not understand here. Not only is there the five-week starting period, but what is now evident is that there is an 11-week starting period. Someone who is moving but staying in accommodation provided by the same social landlord will end up with 11 weeks when they get none of their housing benefit paid, and they are in debt from the very beginning. That has happened to dozens of my constituents. How does that possibly help people get into work?

Huw Merriman: First, we have the two-week run-off with regard to housing benefit. We also have the system of advances. So I do not recognise those figures at all.

Heidi Allen: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Huw Merriman: I will not give way, because I am taking quite a lot of time. The reality is that UC is designed to mirror the world of work. In the world of work, 75% of people get paid monthly, and so the benefits system is designed to do that, because everybody on benefits is supposedly able to find work and this system mirrors the world of work. It is the right system to help people.

Another aspect of UC is universal support. It used to be the case that when someone was on benefits they were languishing on benefits, no one cared about them and they did not get the tailored support that UC gives. Now if anyone chooses to go to their jobcentre, as I do regularly, they will find a completely different approach—one where there is compassion and tailor-made support. The work coaches—[Interruption.] It is all well and good the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) chuntering from the Benches, but if she had spent time with her work coaches, seeing the passion that they have in getting their people into work, she would see that they have more effect in doing that than she has by sitting there chuntering away.

My view is that UC works, and 82% of those on UC believe it works, too. It is all well and good for MPs to knock it for political purposes, but if they wanted their constituents to be helped, they would get behind this system, rather than constantly knocking it for political ends.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The hon. Gentleman says that 82% are satisfied, but does he agree that 18% unsatisfied is still too high?

Huw Merriman: Yes, of course, because we should always strive for 100%, as I said right at the start. But when we hear Opposition Members talking, we might think that the figure is at zero—it is not. I spend the time with those delivering the support and those receiving the support, and they are happy with it. Let me compare that with the previous system of tax credits. They were rushed in so fast by the Labour party that we ended up seeing overpayments of £7.3 billion and people pursued through the courts to get that money returned. Where does that leave the party of compassion? A success rate of 82% is high when one considers the challenging circumstances of people on universal credit.

In my remaining two minutes, let me turn back to those on disability support. I find that many of those who have been assessed for PIP and ESA have been let down by the system. I say to my Front-Bench colleagues that we need to continue to look to do more to help them through the assessments. I recognise that they are very much tailored benefits that take account of the cost of a disability. By their very nature, there will be challenges, but universal credit is absolutely a challenge that we should meet.

Again, I come back to the employment figures: we have got many more people with disabilities into work than the Labour party did. Anybody with a disability should be told that they are just as able to find work, and that they have the support of the Conservative party to do so, as those who are not disabled. Failure to do that is complete discrimination. I am really proud of the support we offer. My office is a Disability Confident office: we want to make sure that we give people the exact same opportunities. I am proud of our position with regard to those with disabilities. The fact is that we are now spending an extra £10 billion to assist people, compared with 2010.

When it comes down to it, we are helping people to get into work—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) says we are not, but I have just said that there are an extra million people in employment under this Government compared with under her party’s Government. The statistics do not—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We do not shout from the Front Bench, nor from any other Bench, but especially not from the Front Bench.

Huw Merriman: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

It is notable that we can deliver rhetoric, shout and talk about the individual cases, which of course we should, but the statistics show that this Government
have got more people into work and are spending more money helping people on benefits. This Government have a record to be proud of, and I am only sorry that more of my colleagues are not willing to stand up and say so.

5.31 pm

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): There has been a huge change in the debates that we have about poverty in this country. When I first came into the House, there were these rather distant debates in which we talked about what the poverty line should be and whether the Government’s benefits were adequate. We now face a situation—certainly in my seat and in the constituencies of others—that is a matter not simply of poverty and people being hard-pressed but of destitution. We cannot be surprised by that, because although the Government have rightly increased the national living wage and personal allowances, most of the cuts in public expenditure to rid us of the deficit have fallen on families and poor families on benefits. If one message goes out from this debate to the Chancellor, I hope that it is that enough is enough. The Prime Minister has talked about our now being through the austerity period; if we are, the first groups who should feel the relaxation of the whip of austerity should be the families who have been so badly hit by the cuts imposed on them to try to balance the books.

There have been seven main cuts, and I wish to remind the House of how extensive they are. They are not cuts that affect pensioners: all affect those who are of family age—families with children. The first is the freeze, which my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) talked about. I congratulate her on securing the debate and on her contribution. Such a freeze is almost unheard of in our terms. In 1953, Harold Macmillan made the decision on behalf of the whole country that, as living standards rose, poorer families would benefit from those rises. Ever since then, Governments have tried to hold to that commitment. They have had varying degrees of success, but their intent has been that the poor should share in rising living standards.

Since 2011, we have had a freeze on benefits that means that the least advantaged—if I can put it in a sarcastic way—have suffered. For example, a single parent who is out of work and has one child has lost £888 of what their income today would be had the freeze not taken place. A single earner couple with two children have suffered the amazing cut in their living standard of £1,845. That alone, I hope, will get the alarm bells ringing in the Treasury, so that when the Chancellor makes his statement come the spring, we will see some change on banning the freeze for the final year.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I am glad that the Chair of the Select Committee has raised the benefits freeze. Our research through the Library shows that this final year of the benefits freeze is due to raise an extra £1.2 billion in savings for the Treasury, because of increased inflation. Does he not agree that, as a result, this Government should scrap the final year of the freeze?

Frank Field: I hope that long before the Chancellor rises at the Dispatch Box—the position that the Minister will be in when he replies to this debate—he will have made the decision that there will be no more freeze. He will say, I hope, that the freeze will be lifted, and I hope that, from this debate, we will build a movement in the country that convinces him and his Cabinet colleagues that that is the one overriding priority.

There are, however, six other cuts of which I wish to remind the House. The first of those six is the cut in council tax benefit. A total of 4.4 million families have been affected by this cut—of not paying council tax in full—with an average weekly loss of £3.

Let me turn now to sanctions, on which the Select Committee, the House and the Government quite properly indulge in debates. Three million people have been sanctioned since 2012. We know now that a person can be in work and sanctioned. I challenge the Minister to answer this when he replies to the debate: as a person can be sanctioned for not getting a higher income, even though they are in work, will he tell me how many work coaches in DWP have been sent for interviews by their colleagues because, given the amount of benefit that they draw as a result of the wages that they gain from DWP, they will now be sanctioned if they do not improve their income? Sanctions, therefore, form the second cut.

Another cut has come in the form of the lowering of the local housing allowance. Since 2013, 1.4 million of our fellow citizens have suffered an average loss of £50 a week. We are not talking about our salaries; we are talking about people who are earning very, very modest incomes from the benefits system.

On the bedroom tax, 704,000 of our constituents have suffered, on average, a weekly loss of £15 a week. A total of 197,000 households are affected by a benefit cut of between £63 and £73. Then there is the two-child limit, which affects 70,000 households, but which is likely to increase to 600,000, with an average weekly loss of £53. Any one of those cuts causes mayhem to the budgets of poorer people who have no savings—whether they are in work or not in work. I have witnessed in my constituency, as other Members have witnessed in their constituencies, an issue now not of poverty, but of destitution. They are the people who we are talking about, and these cuts have absolutely cut them to the bone.

Heidi Allen: I wish in a way that, at the time, I had been able to defend the courage of my good friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman). He is right that employment is up, but for the parts of the country that my right hon. Friend said and I have seen on our tour—I hate that word because it sounds like a holiday—of food banks, what we saw were people who were utterly on the edge. With the greatest respect, universal credit is not built to deal with people who have no financial resilience at all. They are the people that we are talking about, and these cuts have absolutely cut them to the bone.

Frank Field: And beyond. Families know they are finished as a family if they lose their homes, so the fight is to keep the roof over their heads. They go without food; they go without heat; and they go without basic necessities. This debate is, for me, the first time that we have in this House to confront the system for those of our poorest constituents who face not just poverty, but destitution. They are the ones who have paid the most to bring down the budget deficit, and they should be first in the queue, as far as the Chancellor is concerned, to get relief when he makes that spring statement.
Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I am afraid that I will have to reduce the time limit to five minutes.

5.39 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): It is an honour to be able to speak in this estimates day debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on starting us off. It was a pleasure, for the first part of this Parliament, to serve on the Work and Pensions Committee with her, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), and the hon. Members for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle).

I will turn to some of the work we did together on the Committee in a moment. Before I do so, I want to return to the absolutely essential point that must always frame the current debate on benefits. A few years ago, before I entered this place, I was lucky enough to be the director of policy at the Centre for Social Justice, which looks at the root causes of poverty in the UK. One of the things that our research showed time and again, and that the research of my predecessors had shown, was and is that there is a human cost to worklessness that sits alongside the financial cost. The effect of being out of work for an individual, for a family and for large numbers of people in a given community is substantial. It affects people’s self-worth, mental health, and family stability. In itself, alongside the monetary troubles that they have, it affects their resilience.

That is why I am so proud of the fact that it is under a Conservative Government that we now see record employment, and that under this Government we are finally starting to see wages rise. This makes an enormous difference to individuals, families and their communities. It is very difficult to put a monetary value on that, but very easy to see the value of it when we meet those individuals and families and go into those communities. It is a great legacy, because we now have 637,000 more individuals and families and go into those communities. Sitting alongside that, we have the welfare reforms that the Government have been bringing in since 2010, which are nothing short of revolutionary. I think that everyone across the House agrees on their aims. Everyone agrees on where we would like to be—that is, with a welfare system that actively assists, encourages and helps people to get into work, to sustain work, to take more work, and to become more self-reliant in order to be able to provide more easily for their families and for themselves. There is no doubt that universal credit is the mechanism to do that. There is also no doubt that this is a system in evolution.

I have been pleased, with the Select Committee and as a Tory Back Bencher, to work alongside the Government in helping a number of reforms to come through, such as the improvement in the taper rate and the improvements in work allowances. It was very good to see the Joseph Rowntree Foundation publish on 20 February a report showing that 3.9 million families on universal credit will be better off as a result of the changes made at the November Budget last year. This is a sign of real improvement starting to make a difference to the lives of people it was intended to help. Similarly, the new Secretary of State has said that she will seek to increase the number of people who are getting direct payments to their landlords and support to main carers. That is very welcome. I would certainly like the additional surplus that this excellent Chancellor has created to go towards hopefully ending the benefit freeze as soon as possible, allowing investment in universal support, and reducing further the waiting times.

5.44 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I would like to begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on the way in which she opened the debate. The context set out for us by the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), of the cuts since 2010 should be borne in mind during the debate. The House of Commons Library estimates cuts of £37 billion to working-age social security since 2010 and £4.8 billion to disability benefits.

I want to talk about a couple of cases, one of which relates to decision making in personal independence payment cases. I was interested that the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) raised the issue of PIP being a bit of a problem. I have seen numerous instances of very poor-quality decision making in PIP cases, particularly when people are migrated from DLA to PIP. These are people with multiple and severe disabilities, often with lifetime awards under DLA, with fluctuating yet deteriorating conditions and usually with the higher rate mobility component entitling them to a Motability vehicle, but they simply lose that when assessed for PIP and consequently lose their cars and their mobility—the one thing that makes their lives a little easier.

In a recent written answer, the Government admitted that 44%, or a staggering 157,740 people, who were previously getting the higher rate mobility component under DLA had been reassessed and lost their entitlement to the equivalent rate. No doubt some people’s entitlement has been raised—I accept that—but a lot of disabled people have lost their access to a vehicle and had their lives upturned and made much harder, often wrongly. These decisions, many of which are perverse, have come to my advice surgery. They are inevitably overturned when they finally get to an appeal, but that takes months. When they do get to appeal, 70% of cases are overturned, and people get their higher rate mobility back.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (Ind): People do not get any of that additional money during the months that they have to wait for an appeal. The Government say, “Yes, but if you do win the appeal, you get the money back,” but for people who are short of money and on the breadline, this can mean many months of lost income.

Maria Eagle: The hon. Gentleman is correct. For people waiting, it may as well be never. The Courts and Tribunals Service tells me that on Merseyside the average waiting time for an appeal is 38 to 42 weeks—10 months. I have a constituent whose mother came to me in despair for help. She is a young woman of 29 years but has serious and worsening immune conditions, which
are baffling her doctors and causing her health to deteriorate. She has so many conditions, and I will not go through them all, but she can hardly walk at the best of times and sometimes is in a much worse state. She often has to visit four different hospitals, sometimes with two or three appointments a week, and has been using a Motability car to do so. However, she does not have her Motability car any more because it has been taken away. She had a lifetime award of higher rate mobility under DLA, but when she was migrated to PIP, she was only awarded the lower rate. She appealed for a tribunal hearing last May and is yet to receive a date for it. She was recently told that she is likely to have to wait another six months, but my office is trying to get that hearing expedited.

The young woman’s mother came to see me because the car had to be returned and the first trip to hospital without it cost the family £17.50 one way. Her parents are low-paid workers and cannot afford to make such payments. The family were considering having to choose which hospital appointments to go to, which is a shocking situation. Fortunately, the Mayor of Liverpool has a hardship fund. I have referred her to that, which is now paying for the family’s taxi trips, but she should not have to rely on that kind of assistance when she is entitled to the payments; I have no doubt that she will get her car back when she finally gets an appeal heard.

I want to raise another benefits issue affecting disabled young people who have special educational needs. It is about a difference between the rules for ESA and the rules for universal credit that seriously affects a small number of young people with special educational needs. My constituent Antony Hamilton has autism and developmental co-ordination disorder. He is in receipt of PIP and has an education, health and care plan, which required him to complete two years of specialist post-16 education provision before going on to do A-levels. As a consequence, he is a bit older than the typical A-level student, and he turned 20 at the beginning of the second year of his A-level course last October. The child tax credits and child benefit his father received for him ended at that time, but he still had most of a year of full-time education to go.

Under the legacy working-age benefits, Antony could have applied for non-contributory ESA to cover the financial loss, which is £170 a week. Under universal credit, however, there is no such option. He has been told he would have to apply for universal credit, undergo a work capability assessment and be required to work or search for it, which is something he cannot do because he is in full-time education. It is Catch-22 for people like Antony. He is working hard to achieve in educational terms, but his parents are having to spend their small savings to help him to be able to finish his A-levels. The letter his father got from the DWP said:

“The Department of Work and Pensions...does not set the policy and legislation relating to UC, this is the responsibility of the UK Government.”

Will the Minister please enlighten us about who is setting this policy, and about what he is going to do to help Antony?

5.51 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): When it comes to problems with the Department for Work and Pensions and its policies, it is actually quite difficult to know where to start. The people who depend on this Government Department often depend on it absolutely, and it absolutely is not working. It is not working for those who rely on universal credit. Assessments for personal independence payments are not fit for purpose, and the benefits freeze has been described by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation as the “biggest policy driver” of poverty in this country.

Perhaps universal credit might work if the Government had not taken £3 billion out of the budget back in 2015—it might then fulfil its original and admirable brief of simplifying the system and helping people get back into work—but they did, and now it is not doing so. They did put half of the money back, but it still is not enough. I do, however, applaud the Secretary of State for her acknowledgment that the problems with universal credit have contributed to the frightening and unacceptable growth in the use of food banks by families in this country. We are also seeing late payments, increased stress for people who are often already suffering from stress or mental health issues, and a growth in homelessness.

Let us put this into context. The DWP will spend £184 billion on benefits and pensions this year. That is a quarter of all public spending. More than half of that, £105 billion, is on pensions, mainly the state pension. Only £22 billion is spent on working-age benefits, and a further £21 billion on housing benefit. As MPs, we have a duty to be careful with our language and to help change the story people in this country hear about the relationship between benefits and poverty.

The DWP should exist to help families break free from poverty, to support people into work who are able to work and to provide security in old age, but that is not what the story of current policies reflects or tells people who are listening out there. Policies such as the five-week waiting time for universal credit reinforce the feeling among claimants that the Department does not actually want to help them, at least not right away. What they see is a delaying tactic—putting off payments for as long as it possibly can. Meanwhile the Government have spent £370 million last year, and advance payments just paper over the cracks.

Huw Merriman: I beg the hon. Gentleman’s pardon.

In my constituency of Edinburgh West, we are only just learning at first hand about the problems of universal credit, which was rolled out in the constituency at the end of November. We are much better acquainted with the problems caused by PIP assessments and inequities in the changes to the state pension age for women. Every week, I have people come through my door who have been refused PIP, often for the most inexplicable reasons. One constituent, who has had a Motability car for years, was told she did not need it because, if she could drive, she could obviously walk.

Huw Merriman: I tried to intervene on the point about universal credit. I do not believe that I voted on universal credit, because it was voted for prior to 2015, when I was first returned to the House. The policy that the hon. Lady is talking about was delivered by a Lib Dem-Conservative coalition, so it is actually her party’s own policy.
Christine Jardine: Yes, it was our policy, and if it had been delivered with the amount of money that was originally intended, it might have worked. However, in 2015 the then Chancellor took £3 billion out of the budget, leaving the policy crippled.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Christine Jardine: I will continue, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind.

The constituent I mentioned was told that she did not need her mobility car, because if she could drive, she could walk. However, the car was specially adapted for her disability—a disability she was born with and for which she wears callipers. She cannot walk any distance. It was nonsense.

If the Department wants to save money, it should get more of these assessments right the first time, and bring assessment in-house to help it to do that. In 2015-16 the Ministry of Justice spent £103 million organising ESA and PIP appeal hearings, not including the costs to the DWP of defending them, yet two thirds of those hearings went in favour of the claimant. Meanwhile, the Government spent £370 million a year on contracts to Atos, Capita and MAXIMUS to conduct those assessments. That money could be much better spent. Surely it would be cheaper and fairer for the DWP to invest properly in trained professionals to carry out these tests.

Perhaps the most important thing the Government could do—as we have heard, this is the starkest omission from their estimates—is to end the benefits freeze. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, that is the biggest policy driver behind the expected rise in poverty by the end of this Parliament. It estimates that ending the freeze a year early would cost £1.4 billion, reducing the number of people in poverty by 200,000. It is absurd that the benefits freeze, and finally make the DWP work for the people it is intended to work for.

Stephen Timms: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. On JSA, people could not be sanctioned for that and on universal credit they can. I agree with him that that is wrong. That was revealed in a very recent written answer.

Another written answer to a question I asked last week told us that 57% of new universal credit claimants are taking an advance. The proportion of those applying for universal credit who have a month’s savings, as the policy assumes, is less than half. Most applicants have to go into debt to the DWP and take an advance to stay afloat in the first five weeks. Having been forced into debt in that way by the Department, far too many people find it impossible to get out of it. That is why we have seen the big increase in demand for food banks.

The Secretary of State suggested that the problem was temporary, because of early glitches in the roll-out of universal credit. No doubt it is true that the extraordinary delays that were experienced at the start of the universal credit roll-out did make things even worse, but the fact that over half of applicants are forced into debt by taking an advance, because they do not have the money in the bank that the policy assumes they will have, is why so many people have to use food banks and why so many get into arrears with their rent. This problem is hard-baked into the Department’s current policy.

The Trussell Trust made the point that it found the increase in referrals to its food banks was 52% in areas where universal credit had been rolled out for 12 months or more, compared with a 13% increase for areas where it was, at most, three months since universal credit had been rolled out or it had not rolled out at all. In other words, when universal credit is well-established and has been there for at least 12 months, the increase in referrals to food banks is greater than when universal credit has just been introduced. The Trussell Trust has been pointing that out for a considerable length of time.
Another change of tone I welcome came in another written answer last week. It told us that the Department is now working with the Trussell Trust to see if it is possible to develop—I think this is how it referred to it—a “shared conclusion” about the impact of universal credit on food bank demand. I shall certainly be very interested to see that shared conclusion when it is published. The Trussell Trust briefing for this debate highlights the five-week delay as among the “urgent problems causing significant hardship”.

It goes on to say that Trussell Trust food bank referrals due to benefit delays are increasingly driven by this initial wait. It is a huge problem that needs to be fixed.

6.3 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) for her excellent opening remarks.

The social security system was designed to be a safety net, but it has now become so threadbare and the holes so wide that many people are slipping through it. One key reason is that, although DWP spending has increased since 2010, we are supporting a larger pensioner population. There is also the introduction of universal credit, which replaces the previous system under HMRC. The generosity of many other support payments is decreasing. The changes and cuts to social security add up to savings of £30 billion for the Exchequer this year. That is going to rise to £36 billion in 2021 and £38 billion by the end of 2023-24, and this is in the context of Brexit.

The Government have sought to save money from changes to benefit rules, and we have heard about the freeze. There are the £4.8 billion cuts affecting disabled people; disabled people need that extra support because of the extra costs that they face, but that seems absolutely to have escaped the Government. The other thing is penalising children and children not being supported, as they have been in the past, and, of course, restricting women’s eligibility for the state pension by pushing the state pension age up.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): My hon. Friend has to remember that this is against a background of the £12 billion cuts that the present Government fought general elections on. They have no mandate for it, so this all falls into place. However, she raises a very important point that is still a very live issue—women born in the early ’50s being denied their pension. The Government have just shut the door in their faces. I think that it is a disgrace given some of the problems that these women experience now. Some are on the poverty line as a result of all this. Does my hon. Friend not agree?

Debbie Abrahams: I totally agree. I have visited my hon. Friend in Coventry and many of the women from the so-called WASPI group who have been campaigning vigorously on this.

Although we did see a welcome increase in spending on UC in last year’s Budget, at the same time, the disability benefits and benefits for carers went down. Even though there were changes to universal credit last autumn, 3 million people will still be worse off under universal credit. Nine out of 10 low-income disabled households will not benefit from the Budget increases, alongside 640,000 self-employed households and 475,000 working lone-parent households. The effects of these social security cuts in the context of a rising cost of living are there for everyone to see. We have heard about the rise and rise of food banks. I never had a food bank in Oldham until this Government came in.

There has been the increase in personal debt and rent arrears. Eight million—the highest level ever—working households are in poverty. Two thirds of the 4.1 million children living in poverty are from working households. Four million sick and disabled people are living in poverty. Over 300,000 more older people are living in poverty since 2010. Our life expectancy is stalling—this is in the context of an increasing state pension age—and infant mortality, for the first time in 100 years, is increasing. Four babies in 1,000 will not see their first birthday.

The austerity agenda has not helped the economy one iota. Analysis used in the Office for Budget Responsibility’s model has shown that the independent effects of austerity have been to stifl e economic growth by at least £100 billion in the last year alone—that is £3,600 per household. However, it is not just about that—the human toll as a result of these cuts cannot be underestimated.

Last week, we heard about Jodey, who took her own life after she was found fit for work following her work capability assessment. The DWP failed five times to follow its safeguarding rules in the weeks leading up to Jodey’s suicide, although it knew that she had a history of mental health issues. We learnt about 52-year-old Jeff, who won his appeal against his work capability assessment saying he was fit for work seven months after he had died. A few days earlier, we heard about 64-year-old Stephen Smith, whose emaciated six-stone body was photographed by the Liverpool Echo in a hospital bed. He had also been found fit for work. In my Oldham East and Saddleworth constituency, one of the worst cases I ever had involved a man who had a brain tumour. He was refusing to have the life-saving surgery that he needed because he was scared that he was going to get sanctioned. His medical team contacted me, pleading with me to intervene on his behalf.

I have a whole list here of different constituents and the struggles that they have had with the DWP, whether that is with PIP, the work capability assessment or UC. I want to particularly thank my team for the work they have done; without them, I could not do my job.

We are the sixth richest country in the world, and it is reprehensible for us to treat our citizens in this way. We must never forget that, like the NHS, our social security system should be there for all of us in our time of need, providing security and dignity in retirement and the support needed should we become sick or disabled or fall on hard times. It is a vital weapon in our fight against poverty and inequality—and one of which we should be proud, not ashamed.

6.10 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is strange that but a couple of handful of Members are here to discuss one of the largest budgets that the Government dispose of. We never analyse the expenditure very closely as it goes through Parliament; personally, I feel that a new system of assessing expenditure—more like a proper budgetary process in a local authority, frankly—is long overdue.
I will speak primarily about acquired brain injury, which may not come as a surprise to many Members. I know that people think that it looks as if I have had a brain injury of my own of late—it looks far more dramatic from behind than it is on the inside, but I am enormously grateful to people who have commented.

I want to talk about the issue because all too often an acquired brain injury, which might have come about through a road traffic accident, carbon monoxide poisoning, a stroke or a whole series of other means, may not be visible to the naked eye when we meet somebody. I have said this before in the Chamber, and it is true: the person standing in front of us in the queue, who is being difficult and seems drunk, might have a brain injury. All our judgmental attitudes may say more about us than about the person standing in front of us.

When somebody is being assessed by the Department for Work and Pensions for benefits, it is really important that the assessor has a full understanding of brain injury, for a multitude of reasons. First, such judgmental attitudes might be of no assistance whatever; and secondly, because the person’s condition may vary—not only across time, but from day to day or at different times of the day.

One of the most common symptoms of an acquired brain injury, even a relatively mild one that may have followed concussion, is chronic fatigue. I do not just mean feeling tired, as we might from day to day in the normal course of things, but real debilitating fatigue that means that we simply cannot get out of bed—not through laziness, but through utter fatigue at the core of our being. The Department for Work and Pensions has found it very difficult to cope with assessing somebody in that situation without resorting to language of, “Pull your socks up, chap!”

I know that the Minister is keen to see whether there are ways for us to work this out better, and I, along with the all-party parliamentary group on acquired brain injury, am really keen to make sure that every single assessor has some understanding, at least, of acquired brain injury—and, if they are not sure, the ability to refer the individual to another person.

There is another element to the issue. Fatigue is one of the most common elements of an acquired brain injury, so someone with one needs to harness all the energy they do have to strengthen their brain and recuperate. That requires a superhuman effort. I have spoken to individuals who have been through major road traffic accidents. They know that all the stuff they do with their doctors and clinicians—all the neuro-rehabilitation—is about how they strengthen their brain. But the benefits system is so complicated that it makes them feel like a number rather than a person; they find that they are using their energy just to deal with that, rather than making themselves better.

There could be a real advantage if there were a grace period of four or five years for people who have had a brain injury, so that once they had their first assessment they would know they would not have another for a set period. This is not about spending money; it is simply about enabling people to resuscitate and revitalise their own brains.

There is an additional problem which is known as the frontal lobe paradox. People may present extremely well and do well in tests, but some of the other elements of their executive function simply do not work as well as they might. That is why it is so important for us to have a system that can respond to individual needs. I hope very much that in the coming months we will be able to develop the system further, and that Ministers will work onside, to ensure that we can address those needs.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (Ind): Like others, I pay tribute to our colleague the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) for securing this important debate.

In the limited time available, I want to concentrate on a couple of issues which could be resolved. First, the period of four or five years for people who have had a brain injury—and, if they are not sure, the ability to refer the individual to another person. There is additional problem which is known as the frontal lobe paradox. People may present extremely well and do well in tests, but some of the other elements of their executive function simply do not work as well as they might. That is why it is so important for us to have a system that can respond to individual needs. I hope very much that in the coming months we will be able to develop the system further, and that Ministers will work onside, to ensure that we can address those needs.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (Ind): Like others, I pay tribute to our colleague the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) for securing this important debate.

In the limited time available, I want to concentrate on a couple of elements of universal credit in which technical failings still cause real difficulty for individuals who receive it. I am aware that the new Secretary of State has been in listening mode, has taken on board some of the criticisms that she has heard in the House, and has improved and applied the suggestions that have been made. I hope that the Minister will give some feedback on these specific issues, so that the Department can improve the position.

When people who are moved on to universal credit already have a medical condition or disability, they are immediately placed in an assessment period similar to the one that in which they were placed when receiving employment and support allowance. The problem is that the period can be as long as 14 weeks, during which time their incomes can be cut by as much as £200, £300 or even £400 a month. If people on low incomes must wait 14 weeks for the result of an assessment that they have already undergone to receive ESA, that is clearly an anomaly in the universal credit system, which I urge the Minister to examine, respond to, and fix.

There is a second element of universal credit that involves an anomaly. When someone who has been receiving a severe or an enhanced disability allowance—which is only received by those with very significant impairments—moves on to universal credit, that person will automatically lose the additional money. The point of the enhanced disability allowance, which has existed for a long time, is to help people with severe disabilities to receive that little bit of extra money which enables them to function and lead secure and independent lives. I ask Members to imagine immediately losing up to £300 or £400 a month. It would catastrophically damage one’s income. I should be grateful if Ministers revisited and fixed both those anomalies.

Let me finish with a couple of real stories of the kind that we all encounter in our constituencies. They concern tribunals. My senior casework manager, Scott Stevens, is an outstanding advocate for disabled people. During both my times in Parliament, I have always done my best to ensure that he, or one of my team, represents disabled constituents at tribunals as their advocate. I pay tribute to Scott: he has a success rate of about 85%.

When disabled people come to me in connection with their employment or disability, I pay tribute to our colleague the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) for securing this important debate.

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or a year ago, so we had to go to the tribunal to enable her to be put back on to it. I repeat that this is someone with an epileptic condition experiencing three to five episodes a day, yet she was considered not suitable to receive PIP. Members in the Chamber will not be surprised when I tell them that she was restored to 11.5 points so she now gets her PIP entitlement. That is just wrong: it is wrong that she has had to wait 10 months—and we can imagine the amount of debt my constituent is in because obviously she has not been receiving the full entitlement for 10 months. So I pay tribute to Scott Stevens for winning that case and I pay tribute to my constituent and I am glad she has got her PIP entitlement back, but I really do think the DWP has to revisit this so people do not keep having to go to tribunals.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am afraid we have to reduce the time limit to four minutes.

6.20 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I am pleased that the House is having this debate today because it has given Members an opportunity to highlight how the DWP is not being resourced properly. The DWP has the single largest departmental budget, yet it finds itself under-resourced when it comes to dealing with the consequences of the Government’s welfare reforms.

The Government’s welfare reforms, be it universal credit or the personal independence payment, have disproportionately hit the poorest and most vulnerable in our society. Just look at what has happened to those claiming income support and jobseeker’s allowance; both benefits are based on the principle of supporting those already in, or seeking, employment, yet the Government’s decision to include both benefits within the benefits freeze is undoubtedly having the opposite effect. There has been a real-terms decrease in the basic rate of income support and JSA, falling from a high of £78 in 2012 to £72 in 2019. The Trussell Trust highlights that low income was the main reason behind 31% of referrals to its food banks from April to September 2018. The highest point to make is that the Government’s benefit freeze is creating a crisis of in-work poverty—a crisis which the DWP is currently not equipped to address. I urge the Government to bring an end to the benefits freeze now. Prices are rising and the DWP should be properly resourced to support low-income households—households which are currently set to lose £200 this year because of the benefits freeze.

That brings me to the issue of sanctions. I have consistently called on the Government to bring an end to the cruel sanctions regime. There were over 15,000 sanctions taken in April 2018, with the clear majority being implemented against UC claimants. This is despite an admission in a DWP report in October 2018 that there was no evidence that sanctions encourage claimants to get into work or increase their earnings. I was disappointed that the Government chose to reject calls from MPs to ease the burden of sanctions on some of the most vulnerable claimants, including single parents and those with disabilities. There should be a maximum period for which a sanction can apply and greater understanding that some claimants will miss appointments because of issues around health, childcare, finances and even local transport failures.

Members from across the House agree that there are real problems with UC and that the DWP has not been properly resourced to deal with them. The most glaring issue with UC is the five-week wait. The DWP has tried to take steps to address that, but those measures are either time-limited or do not go far enough in supporting those transitioning on to UC. With 1.6 million people expected to transition on to UC this year, it is vital that the Government act now to equip the DWP to deal with this problem.

More than 70% of PIP appeals found in favour of the claimant between January and March 2018. This represents a 17% increase in successful PIP appeals since January to March 2015, and we have to ask why the DWP has spent £108.1 million since October 2015 to fund legal professionals and their staff to fight these appeals while claimants are left to shoulder the costs of their appeal as a result of this Government’s cuts to legal aid. The Labour party wants to bring back legal aid.

I stood with the DWP staff in Coatbridge when it closed its office in 2017, but, sadly, we lost that fight. The building is still empty; why not reopen it and bring back the resources to Coatbridge?

6.24 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on opening the debate and setting the scene for us. I want to talk briefly about the position in Gateshead. My constituency is wholly contained within the local authority area of Gateshead and I want to touch on various points. We are seeing many of the worst problems occurring in my constituency. We had the full roll-out of universal credit in October and November 2017, so many of my constituents did not benefit from the tweaks that we had later. That clearly does not apply now, but there were some problems earlier on. Yes, people who have applied since the changes have seen the benefit of the roll-over of two weeks’ housing benefit, but many have been left in a difficult situation.

The housing company that manages the housing stock across the Gateshead Council area is the Gateshead Housing Company. According to up-to-date information, there are currently 3,087 tenants on universal credit who even now, collectively, have arrears of £1.8 million. That is an average of £583 each, up from an average of £283 before universal credit. I am told that this is caused by the delays in receiving payments. I am also told that 41% of the tenants of the Gateshead Housing Company have been put on alternative payment arrangements, which is a much higher proportion than either the Government or the company expected. This is not a case of the authority or the housing company leaving people to the worst of the system; this is happening after people have had help.

This builds on existing issues resulting from the bedroom tax, or the under occupancy tax—whichever you want to call it, the problem is the same. It involves those who do not have a chance, whatever they might want to do, to move to a smaller property. There were 1,579 people affected by that, and we can see a cumulative effect building up. The roll-out figure for people going on to universal credit has been much greater than expected. As I say, this is not an area in which people have been left to struggle, but there is still a problem with the housing revenue account.
I want to speak briefly, and quickly, about a report commissioned by Gateshead Council into the impact of universal credit. These are the headlines. First, those claiming universal credit found the experience complicated, difficult and demeaning. Secondly, the consequences of waiting five weeks for their money—and in many cases up to 12 weeks, with an average wait of 7.5 weeks—pushed many people into debt, rent arrears and hardship. For many of them, this included going without food. Thirdly, the staff supporting claimants found the system to be inconsistent, with inaccurate advice being given and difficulty in correcting what were clearly mistakes. Fourthly, universal credit is not working for vulnerable claimants, and it significantly adds to the workload of the staff supporting those claimants. I could go on, but I do not have time to do so.

We have also heard about the difficulty for people moving from the disability living allowance to the personal independence payment, with many people having their benefits reinstated on appeal. It cannot be right that the system allows people to go through all that agony, only to then reinstate their benefits. We have to get that right. Finally, I want to mention one of my constituents, Rev. Tracey Hume, who has said:

“...I volunteer with a food bank. I am also a Methodist minister who has had to find benevolent funds to pay for gas and electricity while people wait five weeks for their first payment. We cannot expect people to live like that.”

6.28 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): A few hours ago, our city bid goodbye to Kane Walker. He was a young man who died on our streets in the cold of January. A man gone; a man who should still be with us; a man who, together, we have failed to save. And yet Kane Walker was not the only homeless man to have died in Birmingham. More than 70 homeless people have died on the streets of our city over the past four years. That is why I say to the Minister that the core of the debate today is not numbers or statistics but the moral emergency of homelessness that is now out of control because the safety net has been shredded around people who are only a couple of twists of fate away from the pavement.

When the National Insurance Act 1946 was passing through Parliament, creating the Minister’s Department, Clem Attlee himself moved the Second Reading. He was absolutely determined to see a social security system in this country that would deliver freedom from fear of want. He wanted to slay the five giants of injustice that Beveridge identified back in 1944. However, look at the evil giant of unemployment today. In Birmingham, youth unemployment has shot up by 23% over the past year, with 15,000 more young people now out of work. When Beveridge launched his report, he talked about the giant of disease. Today, disability is knocking more people into poverty than ever before, and yet 33,000 people in our region have been stripped of their right to PIP over the past few years, plunging them into a poverty from which it is difficult to recover.

When Beveridge talked about his five giants, he talked about freedom from want, and yet nearly 60,000 people in our region last year had to rely on food banks—a third of them children—which is a rise of nearly a third over the past few years. The giants of injustice that Beveridge identified now hunt and haunt us on the streets because of the collapsing safety net, and it is the crisis of universal credit that is at the core of the problem. I was amazed to discover in an answer to a written question yesterday that the Mayor of the West Midlands has not written to the Government once in the past year to express concerns about universal credit.

In my last minute I will rattle through the many different problems that Birmingham MPs have identified. There is wholesale confusion about eligibility for housing benefit and universal credit. Huge variations exist in the deductions made for advance payments. The self-employed experience long waits for correct payments. Sanctions are issued against those who are too ill to attend interviews. Those who challenge the inappropriate use of sanctions face huge benefit delays of up to five months. Constituents are forced to travel across the city to access IT to fill out online forms. Constituents with mental health problems are denied the right to face-to-face support. There are process delays and confusion about getting link codes to connect to childcare components, and the same applies to entitlements. There is total confusion about those moving from non-UC areas into UC areas. More confusion exists around eligibility for free prescriptions. Finally, there is complete confusion for our EU neighbours who have to pass the habitual residence test once again. In one of the richest countries on earth and in a city like mine, how can it be that homelessness has spiralled by 1,000% in five years? The system is in crisis, and this Government need to put compassion back into the system where it belongs.

6.32 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the impassioned, articulate and erudite speech by the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) and to speak from the Front Bench for the SNP. It has been a good debate, and I commend the speeches from the hon. Members for High Peak (Ruth George), for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and for Blaydon (Liz Twist), the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) and the many others who made fantastic speeches. I agree with the Chair of the Finance Committee, the hon. Member for Rhondda, that this debate is far too short and that it is no way for us to scrutinise the spending of the largest-spending Department.

While I agreed wholeheartedly with all that was said by the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, he listed a number of problems and areas that require improvements, and the Scottish Government are already acting on two of them. I hope that he will reflect on the fact that the Scottish Government have maintained council tax benefit and fully mitigated the bedroom tax, and we can see the difference in the child poverty in Scotland as a result.

The hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), who is not in his place, was right to say that work is the best route out of poverty, but while the nations of the UK have record employment levels, child poverty rates are still rising. We know that the Government are about to publish some very damning child poverty statistics, so Conservative Members cannot ignore the need for greater state intervention in this area. It cannot just be about work.
In the limited time available to me, I will raise a number of topics that expand on some of the things that have already been said by others. First, I want UK Ministers to look in greater detail at the benefits freeze, which was introduced in the 2015 Budget—a Budget, of course, that attempted to obliterate the social security system in these isles. The freeze has seen the value of the benefits affected drop by 6.1% over a four-year period, which has hit households hard and is seen by many groups as the key driver of rising child poverty. The Resolution Foundation said this month that child poverty is projected to rise by a further 6% by 2023-24, which would mark a record high.

Billions of pounds of savings have been made through the benefits freeze on the backs of the lowest-income families. In the final year of the freeze, the Exchequer is set to achieve even greater savings than anticipated. The higher than anticipated inflation rate means that the freeze will save over £1.2 billion more next year than the £3.5 billion that had been targeted.

When we know that the freeze is contributing to higher rates of poverty and that the Treasury is about to save more money than even it had targeted, surely the final year of the freeze needs to go. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has already said that she does not want to see the freeze continue any longer. She is acknowledging the difficulties it has caused, so why do she and others not go one step further and stop the final year? The spring statement would be the ideal opportunity for that to happen.

I turn now to an area that the Government do not want to be debated. I have called for a debate and a vote on this issue on three occasions, and other Members across the House have, too, but we are being ignored by this Government. UK Ministers want to enact a piece of legislation that is seven years old—it was brought in two Governments and two Parliaments ago—to cut pension credit entitlement. It will mean that mixed-aged couples will no longer be entitled to pension credit and will have to claim universal credit if one member of the couple is under state pension age. It has been estimated that this will cut £7,000 from the incomes of affected households.

When the measure was passed in 2012, we were in a very different political and economic landscape. Pensioner poverty was decreasing, but now we know from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that pensioner poverty could be on the rise again. It is clear that this Government need to seek a new mandate for the cuts. They need to test the will of the House on what it has inherited and see whether it is still the right thing to do.

Staying with pensions, we know that a number of those who will be affected by the cuts to pension credit will be some of the 1950s women who have been ripped off on their state pension entitlement by this and previous Governments. The UK Government must do more to help the WASPI women, and they must listen to some of the suffering that cutting their state pension entitlement has caused. Despite the rises we have seen via the triple lock, it is worth pointing out that the UK state pension remains one of the most miserly in Europe.

An area where the new Secretary of State has shifted ground is on the two-child policy. She has accepted that rolling out the two-child policy to children born at any time, not just those born after the policy was introduced, would be unfair. We appreciate the small steps the Government have taken in some areas of universal credit, including the two-child policy, but they are clearly not enough. Given that the Secretary of State has accepted the injustice of one aspect of the two-child policy, surely she does not have far to travel to accept that limiting social security payments to two children is morally and socially wrong in its entirety. I urge her to rethink this disastrous policy, which is already forcing more children into poverty.

There is also a growing campaign, as we have heard again today, for the Government to do more on the five-week wait for universal credit. They have taken some steps to assist people moving from the legacy system to universal credit, but they have not gone far enough. A good place to start would be to use the assessment period for the advance payment of UC proper. If there is an acceptance that people need an advance, why say that the money needs to be paid back? People cannot be expected to live off fresh air, and they should not be expected to prolong indebtedness or financial hardship.

The pressures of UC do not stop at those who are receiving it. We heard yesterday that the Public and Commercial Services Union members who are working at service centres in Walsall and Wolverhampton have balloted to strike over changes to workload, recruitment and staff consultations. On top of the problems in UC, ongoing scandals are facing the personal independence payment, employment and support allowance, which was debated yesterday, and the withdrawal of disability premiums—even with some transitional provisions from this Government, this is letting disabled people down.

Meanwhile, the Scottish Government are building a social security system based on dignity and respect, one that garners the confidence of those who need it and the buy-in of taxpayers who pay for it. We have created a carers allowance supplement, to uplift payments by £442 a year, better to reward carers for the incredible job they do. We have introduced the best start grant and baby payment in Scotland, which expands on the UK’s maternity grant by providing eligible families with £600 on the birth of a first child and £300 for subsequent children, without a cap on the number of payments made. What the Scottish Government have done already, and plan to do with new announcements soon, shows this Government what is possible.

In conclusion, while the problems I have listed with the UK system persist, we cannot be expected to agree with the Department for Work and Pensions estimate. The Government need to do more and come back having built a system based on dignity and respect, as we see starting in Scotland. This Secretary of State, the sixth I have faced, is taking steps in the right direction. She has admitted that there are problems with the two-child policy and finally admitted that there is a link between this Government’s social security policies and the rise in food bank use, but they must go further. I know she is pleading with the Treasury for the resources to go further, and we hope we can hear of that at the spring statement.

6.41 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on securing such an
important debate, and of course thanks go to the 14 Members from across the House who have contributed to it. They made very powerful speeches indeed. This is my first experience of closing an estimate’s day debate for the Opposition, but, sadly, it is certainly not my first experience of a debate in this Chamber that highlights the chaos, unfairness and even sheer inhumanity of our current social security system under this Government. Debates such as today’s have been a depressingly familiar occurrence during my short time in this Chamber. They have been depressingly familiar for those of us who are debating and highlighting these issues, but of course the position is far worse and far more serious for those experiencing them, as was illustrated by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams). This system is dehumanising and frightening, and it is, on too many occasions, a tragedy.

As we have heard today, report after report from the Work and Pensions Committee, the National Audit Office and the Trussell Trust has offered major warnings about the Government’s direction of travel. Their findings have been echoed throughout this Chamber once again today. It is troubling enough to hear yet more accounts from right hon. and hon. Members of the human cost of this Government’s approach, in contributions such as that from my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak, who spoke about the rising child poverty evidenced by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and that from my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), who spoke about the human tragedy that is homelessness and youth unemployment, but what is worse is that despite some of the spin, the warm words and the change in mood music, there is still no systematic evidence that this Government are acting in a coherent manner to address the problems that Members have highlighted today.

Universal credit has caused severe hardship for hundreds of thousands of people, yet the DWP is still failing to address the key issue of the five-week wait for an initial payment, as stated by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms). In the past year, 57% of new universal credit claimants have received an advance payment. It is a debt. That is a clear indication of the dire need people are experiencing. Make no mistake: just because 57% received a loan—an advance payment—that does not mean that the other 43% had no problems with the service at all. For many of them, the reality was delay, debt, hunger and food banks.

Recently, the Secretary of State finally admitted what no one before her would admit but almost everybody in this Chamber already knew: the growth in food banks is linked to universal credit. It is belatedly welcome that the growth in food banks is linked to universal credit. It is belatedly welcome that the Government are finally, partially, waking up to the truth, but accepting it is not enough: action is needed. The Secretary of State claims to have listened to charities and Opposition Members when we evidenced the chaos and hardship that unmanaged migration would bring to 2.78 million people. Let me be clear: that chaos and hardship for 2.78 million people will now be chaos and hardship for 10,000 people. We are calling for a halt to the process altogether.

To add insult to injury, the Government claim that nobody will be worse off as a result of the changes, but, as evidenced by many of the contributions today, that really is not the case. Their belated, forced and haphazard approach to protecting severe disability premium claimants, some of whom were set to lose £178 per month, suggests a Government without a full understanding of how their own policy will affect people. There remain circumstances in which people will lose transitional protection—for example, when they become a couple or if they separate. How can a party that once claimed to be the champion of the family implement a policy that makes people think twice about formally entering a relationship because of the financial cost or, even worse, condemns people to staying in one that is not working and that is not safe, because they cannot afford to leave?

Were someone without prior knowledge or experience of what we are debating to have sat in the Chamber today, they would have heard these stories and asked a simple question—why? Although it is true that backgrounds to stories can be different and the reasons multiple, there is a simple answer to that simple question: austerity. The Library estimates that cuts to spending on social security and working-age tax credits will mean that some £37 billion will have been cut from social security by 2021-22, compared with 2010. Meanwhile, the richest corporations, including those in the financial sector that should shoulder some of the responsibility for austerity, have had tax cuts of more than £110 billion. That is not fair, right or just.

Child poverty is up, with a massive 4.2 million children in need; in-work poverty is up, and now affects 8 million people who are in work; and wages have not recovered to 2008 levels. This Government have spent nine years using social security as a vehicle for cuts; meanwhile some of their friends in the financial sector and in the banks have received bonuses and unjustifiable tax cuts. Ministers may claim a jobs boom, but the reality for thousands and thousands of our constituents is zero-hours contracts or fearing for their jobs, as more and more of our manufacturing and retail base faces mounting insecurity and instability.

Despite all that, the Department for Work and Pensions supplementary estimates show that the Department did not bid for additional 2018-19 funding from the Treasury. Austerity is not over, and there appears to be little or no attempt from the Department for Work and Pensions to make it so. The Resolution Foundation has estimated that the fourth year of the benefit freeze alone saves the Exchequer £1.5 billion in 2019-20, making a total of £4.4 billion over the four years. That has meant that the poorest and most vulnerable people are falling further and further behind. The record shows us that when it comes to social security, this is a Government who do not change course.

6.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Justin Tomlinson): It is a pleasure to respond to this debate—a vital discussion on how this Government, and our Department in particular, support people across society. I wish to pay tribute to the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George). We have not
always agreed on every single issue, but it is clear that she is a tireless campaigner in this area. Her speech was particularly measured. She highlighted some genuine concerns that she has been pushing on in the years since she was elected. She should be proud that, in some of those areas, she has already effected change, and I know that she is an incredibly valuable member of the Work and Pensions Committee. I had the pleasure of joining her for about four weeks. Securing this debate is a tribute to her efforts.

There have been some very good speeches. In the limited time that I have, I will not be able to cover all of them, but I and my ministerial colleagues have taken note of everything that has been said and, where relevant, we will make direct contact.

Last year, the Department supported 20 million people—more than half of the adult population. We spend somewhere in the region of £190 billion, slightly more than a quarter of Government spending, and the equivalent to the GDP of Portugal. We have always been proud to share the proceeds of our growing economy with, often, some of the most vulnerable people in society.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) made a powerful point about the impact on workless households and what an enormous difference that work can make. My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) said that, probably, the Government’s greatest achievement is our record on employment. Since 2010, the employment rate has increased to a joint record high. Youth unemployment has almost halved; the female unemployment rate is at a record low; and nearly 1 million more disabled people are in work than in 2013.

Last year, wages grew at their fastest rate in a decade at 3.4%. We are going further to support those in work, with the introduction of the national living wage, which is worth £2,000 a year. The changes to the income tax threshold are worth £1,200 a year. We have seen the doubling of free childcare and the expansion of free child care support through universal credit. Money being spent on childcare support has risen from £4 billion in 2010 to £6 billion today—a 50% increase. However, this jobs miracle is not a given. Our labour market is outperforming many other developed countries: more people have moved into work in the UK since 2010 than in France, Spain, Ireland, the Netherlands, Austria and Norway combined. What a stark contrast that is to the previous Labour Government, and every other Labour Government who have always left office with higher unemployment.

Many of the speeches have understandably focused on universal credit. We are creating a welfare system in which it pays to work. It simplifies a complex legacy benefits system that too often thwarted opportunities to work. I was heartened that my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) said that, probably, the Government’s greatest achievement is our record on employment. Since 2010, the employment rate has increased to a joint record high. Youth unemployment has almost halved; the female unemployment rate is at a record low; and nearly 1 million more disabled people are in work than in 2013.

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Many of the speeches have understandably focused on universal credit. We are creating a welfare system in which it pays to work. It simplifies a complex legacy benefits system that too often thwarted opportunities to work. I was heartened that my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) said that, probably, the Government’s greatest achievement is our record on employment. Since 2010, the employment rate has increased to a joint record high. Youth unemployment has almost halved; the female unemployment rate is at a record low; and nearly 1 million more disabled people are in work than in 2013.
the Work and Pensions Committee. We also work with those with genuine, real-life experience, because they will not only raise, with their experiences, what needs to be improved, but can help with the training and guidance of our frontline staff.

**Maria Eagle:** I know this is a small point in the overall scheme of universal credit, but I mentioned my constituent Antony Hamilton and the issue he has in doing his A-levels while being a bit older because of his special educational needs. I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm whether anything could be done to help Antony.

**Justin Tomlinson:** The hon. Lady made a powerful point about Antony, and the relevant Minister will contact her to discuss it further.

The key for us is partnership working. On domestic abuse, we are rightly working with Women’s Aid and Refuge to help with training and guidance, and to strengthen our ability to identify, refer and support. We are working with organisations such as Barnardo’s and the Children’s Society to strengthen opportunities for care leavers. Ex-offenders are working closely with the Ministry of Justice to make sure that their universal credit claim is in place before they leave prison so that no people are falling between the gaps. On homelessness and rough sleeping, we are working with a number of organisations. Only today, Crisis said that over the past two years the Government have been showing drive and energy.

**Liam Byrne** rose—

**Justin Tomlinson:** I am sorry but I do not have time to give way. The duty to refer change that was brought in in October will be addressing the points that the right hon. Gentleman made.

This party is committed to supporting the most vulnerable. Household incomes have never been higher. Income inequality has fallen. Risks of low income and material deprivation for children and pensioners have never been lower. The incomes of the poorest fifth are up by £400 in real terms, with 300,000 fewer children in absolute poverty. We are now spending £50 billion a year to support those with disabilities and long-term health conditions—£4 billion higher than in 2010. We, as a Government, are determined to help the most vulnerable. This is what drives me and many Members as a Government, are determined to help the most vulnerable.

I was pleased to hear from the Minister that the Government are looking to do more. My colleagues on the Select Committee are working on two reports on natural migration to universal credit and the welfare safety net. I hope the Government will read and respond to those, as well as the report being compiled by the all-party group on the many issues that remain with universal credit, many of which do not require additional funding but, if solved, will help people to be supported by a personalised system.

**Question deferred (Standing Order No. 54).**

7 pm

The Deputy Speaker put the deferred Questions (Standing Order No. 54).

**SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATE 2018-19**

**DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION**

**Resolved,**

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2019, for expenditure by the Department for Education:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £13,388,055,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 1966,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £4,460,127,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £4,775,855,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

**SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATE 2018-19**

**DEPARTMENT FOR WORK AND PENSIONS**

**Question put,**

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2019, for expenditure by the Department for Work and Pensions:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £880,517,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 1966,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £170,914,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £1,334,611,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

The House divided: Ayes 294, Noes 52.

**Division No. 338**

**AYES**

Adams, Nigel  
Afolami, Bim  
Afriyie, Adam  
Aldous, Peter  
Amess, Sir David  
Andrew, Stuart  
Argar, Edward  
Atkins, Victoria  
Bacon, Mr Richard  
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi  
Baker, Mr Steve  
Baldwin, Harriett  
Barclay, Mr Stephen  
Baron, Mr John  
Bebb, Guto  
Bellingham, Sir Henry  
Benn, Mr Nicholas  
Benyon, rh Richard  
Beresford, Sir Paul  
Berry, Jake  
Blackman, Bob  
Blunt, Crispin  
Boles, Nick  
Bone, Mr Peter  
Bowie, Andrew  
Bradley, Ben  
Bradley, rh Karen  
Brady, Sir Graham  
Braverman, Suella  
Breerton, Jack  
Bridgen, Andrew  
Brine, Steve  
Brokenshire, rh James  

The Deputy Speaker then put the Questions on the outstanding Estimates (Standing Order No.55).

ESTIMATES 2019–20 (NAVY) VOTE A

Resolved,
That, during the year ending with 31 March 2020, a number not exceeding 37,200 all ranks be maintained for Army Service and that numbers in the Reserve Land Forces be authorised for the purposes of Parts 1, 3, 4, and 5 of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 up to the maximum numbers set out in Votes A 2019-20, HC 1852.—(Mike Freer.)

ESTIMATES 2019–20 (ARMY) VOTE A

Resolved,
That, during the year ending with 31 March 2020, a number not exceeding 106,880 all ranks be maintained for Army Service and that numbers in the Reserve Land Forces be authorised for the purposes of Parts 1, 3, 4, and 5 of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 up to the maximum numbers set out in Votes A 2019-20, HC 1852.—(Mike Freer.)

ESTIMATES 2019–20 (AIR) VOTE A

Resolved,
That, during the year ending with 31 March 2020, a number not exceeding 35,090 all ranks be maintained for Air Force Service and that numbers in the Reserve Air Forces be authorised for the purposes of Parts 1, 3, 4, and 5 of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 up to the maximum numbers set out in Votes A 2019-20, HC 1852.—(Mike Freer.)

ESTIMATES, EXCESSES, 2017–18

Resolved,
That, for the year ending with 31 March 2018—
(1) resources, not exceeding £665,000, be authorised to make good excesses for use for current purposes as set out in Statement of Excesses 2017–18, HC 1852.—(Mike Freer.)

SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES 2018–19

Resolved,
That, for the year ending with 31 March 2019:
(1) the resources authorised for use for current purposes be reduced by £41,247,306,000, in accordance with HC 1930, HC 1947, HC 1959, HC 1963 and HC 1966,
(2) further resources, not exceeding £1,008,805,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes, as so set out, and
(3) a further sum, not exceeding £3,294,522,000, be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund for and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—(Mike Freer.)

ESTIMATES, VOTE ON ACCOUNT 2019–20

Resolved,
That, for the year ending with 31 March 2020:
(1) resources, not exceeding £242,111,176,000 be authorised, on account, for use for current purposes as set out in HC 1946, HC 1950, HC 1960, HC 1964, HC 1965 and HC 1967; 10 Tuesday 26 February 2019 OP No.257: Part 1 Business Today: Chamber
(2) resources, not exceeding £39,226,098,000 be authorised, on account, for use for capital purposes as so set out, and
(3) a sum, not exceeding £3,243,874,322,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—(Mike Freer.)

Ordered, That a Bill be brought in upon the foregoing Resolutions;
That the Chairman of Ways and Means, Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer, Elizabeth Truss, John Glen, Robert Jenrick and Mel Stride bring in the Bill.

SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION (ANTICIPATION AND ADJUSTMENTS) (NO. 2) BILL

Presentation and First Reading
Mel Stride accordingly presented a Bill to authorise the use of resources for the years ending with 31 March 2018, 31 March 2019 and 31 March 2020; to authorise the issue of sums out of the Consolidated Fund for the years ending 31 March 2019 and 31 March 2020; and to appropriate the supply authorised by this Act for the years ending with 31 March 2018 and 31 March 2019. Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 343).

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,
That, at this day's sitting, proceedings on (a) the motion in the name of Secretary Sajid Javid relating to Prevention and Suppression of Terrorism and (b) the Second Reading of the Children Act 1989 (Amendment) (Female Genital Mutilation) Bill [Lords] may be entered upon, though opposed, at any hour; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(Mike Freer.)

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Ind): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance. May I thank the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, the right hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington) for the preparation of papers relating to the impact of no deal on the United Kingdom? The summary is accurate. I say that because, on Privy Council terms, he allowed me to go through a large number of papers that go into the detail from which there is this summary. However, it is the detail, Mr Deputy Speaker, that fully explains the impact of a no-deal Brexit, leading the Brexit Secretary to comment that it would be ruinous for this country. The guidance I seek from you is how I now obtain the publication of that detail in such a form that right hon. and hon. Members can read it, in the same way that the Government allowed us to read the impact assessments?
Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): The right hon. Lady has certainly put that point on the record. I am sorry she feels that she has been slightly short-changed with regard to what she thought would be available. What is allowed to be seen is not a point for the Chair, but what I would say is that there are Ministers here. I would expect them to take on board her request and I know well that she will certainly pursue it, other than on this point of order, to make sure the papers she feels should be shown are accessible to all Members. Her point is well made and I am sure people can now reflect on it.

Prevention and Suppression of Terrorism

7.17 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): I beg to move.

That the draft Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 25 February, be approved.

The UK has often felt the sharp pain of terrorism in recent years. Tragically, British families have lost loved ones in Manchester and London, in Tunisia, in France and in Spain. As Home Secretary, I am determined to do all I can to stop this happening again, to protect the lives and liberty of our citizens wherever they are in the world and to preserve the international rule of law.

Proscription is a vital tool to help us to disrupt terrorist networks and those who support them. The loss of 30 British lives in Sousse in 2015 shows the importance of international co-operation. Terrorism is a global threat and we must work closely with other countries to tackle it. We cannot and we will not ignore acts of terror that are committed overseas. To do so would make us all less secure. We must send a strong message to our citizens and the world that we will never condone terrorism, and that the warped ideologies of these ruthless groups have absolutely no place in our society.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I strongly welcome this order from the Home Secretary, who is standing up for what is morally right for our country and standing up against terrorism. The banning of Hezbollah is not before time. What happens if these groups rebadge themselves under a different name, and what action would he take?

Sajid Javid: I welcome my right hon. Friend’s support. To answer his question, that is something that we monitor with the help of Home Office officials. If that does happen, we will bring a relevant order to Parliament, as we did recently with another terrorist group that had previously been proscribed. It is something that we try to stay on top of and make sure that there is no way for these terrorist groups to dodge proscription by the UK Government.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sajid Javid: I give way to the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley).

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I congratulate the Secretary of State on the motion that he is bringing to the House tonight. Of course, Members on this Bench need no lecture about the history of Irish terrorism. We have three plaques to Members who were murdered from Northern Ireland or by Irish terrorists. However, with regards to the specific action tonight, will the Secretary of State be prepared to extend this motion to include members of the Muslim Brotherhood?

Sajid Javid: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that a number of groups are already proscribed—well over 70—including, of course, a number of terrorist groups related to Northern Ireland terrorism. He mentioned a specific group. All I would say is that we keep the whole
area of terrorism and groups, and which ones are active, under review. Should we feel that we need to come back to Parliament with a further order, we would not hesitate in doing that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sajid Javid: I give way to my hon. Friend for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy).

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I congratulate the Home Secretary on this excellent move. Let us be clear about Hezbollah: it is a group that promotes Jew hate. It promotes murder and it will never, in any circumstances, recognise the only democratic state in the middle east. In that context, does my right hon. Friend share my surprise and confusion over why the Opposition Front Benchers cannot support the proscription of a group that promotes murder and racism?

Sajid Javid: I very much understand everything that my hon. Friend said, and I obviously cannot speak for the views of the official Opposition. They will get an opportunity in a moment to set out their views, and the public will be able to draw their own conclusions.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sajid Javid: I will give way one more time, to my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), then I will make some progress and give way again later.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I strongly commend my right hon. Friend and praise him for the action that he is taking this evening. He spoke about the powerful message that this sends about this Government’s view on terrorism, but does he agree that this is not just about sending the important message that there is no safe space for terror groups on British soil, but about the practical impact of the measure in front of us tonight, which is to shut down fundraising activities and ensure that support for terror in this country is closed down?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The whole point of proscription, why it was set out in the Terrorism Act 2000—since then, successive Governments have come to this Dispatch Box and recommended that a number of organisations be proscribed—and this process is that it has real practical action on the ground, for example, not just to stop people being members of the organisations that are proscribed, but to stop them supporting them in any way, including giving them any kind of publicity or oxygen for their vile means.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sajid Javid: I will make some progress and give way in a moment.

This is why I am laying this order to proscribe Hezbollah in its entirety and crack down on several other terror organisations. Subject to the will of Parliament, this order will make membership of any part of Hezbollah a criminal offence in the UK. It will give police the power to tackle those who fly its gun-emblazoned flag on our streets, inflaming community tensions. It will give us more power to disrupt the activity of an organisation who are committed to armed combat, who violently oppose the Israeli people, who destabilised a fragile middle east, who helped to prolong the brutal Syrian conflict, and whose attacks have reached into Europe. We will not hesitate to proscribe groups where they pose a terrorist threat.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): I strongly support the decision that my right hon. Friend has taken. The statement that I have seen from the Opposition makes a distinction between the political and military wings of Hezbollah and demands proof that the so-called political wing falls foul of proscription criteria. Will he confirm that Hezbollah itself makes no such distinction, which is entirely plastic and artificial? They are one and the same.

Sajid Javid: I shall come to my hon. Friend’s important point in a moment. It is fair to say that Hezbollah itself laughs at that distinction—it mocks it. It does not understand why some countries continue to make this artificial distinction. My hon. Friend has raised an important point.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): I congratulate the Home Secretary on this decision. Does he agree with me that it is one thing to engage with terrorists in an attempt to get them to renounce violence and pursue entirely political aims, and quite another to engage with them to show solidarity with them and support for them? Does he agree that, on occasions such as this, hon. Members who have done that in the past should take every opportunity they can to apologise, not hide?

Sajid Javid: I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman, whom I thank for his support for the order and his passionate words. He is absolutely right: if there are hon. Members—perhaps there are—who in the past have thought of Hezbollah in a positive light, today is a fresh opportunity for them to demonstrate that they stand against terrorism in all its forms, whether Hezbollah or any of the other organisations that I will be proscribing today.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Is it not the truth that there is not the slightest shred of evidence, after decades of European and British contact, that Hezbollah has in any way moderated? It is still one, official group.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the evidence, some of which I will come to in respect of the groups we are recommending for proscription today. It is quite clear from open source reporting that Hezbollah has been involved, for example, on the side of the Syrian regime in the Syrian conflict. That has led to countless deaths, and it continues to do so in that most horrific conflict.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sajid Javid: I want to make some progress; I will give way in a moment.

The proscription order before the House today is the 23rd under the Terrorism Act 2000. If agreed by the House and the other place, it will ban three groups that I deem a threat to this country. First, there is Hezbollah,
also known as “the party of God”. The order extends the proscription of Hezbollah’s military wing to cover the group in its entirety. There have long been calls to ban the whole group, with the distinction between the two factions denoted as smoke and mirrors. Hezbollah itself has laughed off the suggestion that there is a difference. I have carefully considered the evidence and I am satisfied that they are one and the same, with the entire organisation being linked to terrorism.

As I am sure hon. Members are aware, Hezbollah is committed to armed resistance to the state of Israel. It has the largest non-state military force in Lebanon. As the House will appreciate, I cannot go into the details of current intelligence, but I can say that Hezbollah has been reported in many open sources as being linked to or claiming responsibility for many atrocities. These include a suicide bomb attack on a Buenos Aires Jewish community centre in 1994 that left 85 people dead and hundreds injured. The bloodshed came just two years after an attack on the Israeli embassy in that same city, which killed 29 people. Hezbollah’s involvement in the Syrian war since 2012 continues to prolong the conflict and the brutal repression of the Syrian people. In 2016, it helped besiege Aleppo, stopping humanitarian aid reaching parts of the city for six months, putting thousands at risk of mass starvation. Its actions continue to destabilise the fragile middle east.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): May I say to my right hon. Friend how pleased my constituents are at the Home Secretary on overcoming the nonsense about different wings in an organisation that it will help to protect our friends in Israel, and give comfort to Jews across the world.

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. Friend for his words. What I can confirm is that if this order is passed by Parliament tonight, it will be a criminal offence for anyone, in public, to wear any clothing or carry any articles, including flags, which will arouse reasonable suspicion that an individual is a member or a supporter of a proscribed organisation.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate the Home Secretary on overcoming the nonsense about there being separate military and political wings. Hezbollah itself has said:

“We don’t have a military wing and a political one; we don’t have Hezbollah on one hand and the resistance party on the other...Every element of Hezbollah, from commanders to members...is in the service of the resistance”.

I congratulate the Home Secretary on laying this order tonight.

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. Friend. Again, he has highlighted the fallacy about different wings in an organisation which has only one wing, and that is a wing of terrorism.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Al-Muqawama—the resistance in Lebanon—is indeed entirely part of the single organisation. Does he agree, however, that what this organisation has done, with the backing of Iran in Syria—and not just in areas of the middle east but with Syrian support in places such as Argentina, which he has already cited—is spread antisemitism, and spread the repression of ideas and liberty, all over the world? This is an act of resistance that my right hon. Friend is right to take in the UK, but he is also joining the Dutch and other European countries that have taken this action already. Will he encourage more countries to follow suit?

Sajid Javid: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. As he says, other countries have taken the action that we are proposing, and I shall mention a couple of them in a moment. However, I hope that others, including our allies across the world, are listening, and that those that still maintain the distinction between a military and a political wing will listen carefully and perhaps be encouraged to take the action that we are taking.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): May I build on that point? The Home Secretary will recognise the importance of the Five Eyes organisation. I know that the United States and Canada have already made the decision that we are making tonight, but there is still work to be done with our allies in Australia and New Zealand. Will the Home Secretary engage specifically with our Five Eyes partners to ensure that there is a uniform approach and a collective will to fight against Hezbollah?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman has mentioned our closest allies when it comes to matters of security and intelligence. He will know that there is a strong and regular dialogue and conversation with all our friends in the Five Eyes alliance. I hope that those that have not proscribed Hezbollah fully are listening carefully. I intend to raise the matter in the Five Country Ministerial, which I will chair and host in the UK later this year.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I welcome the Home Secretary’s announcement and commend him for his clear leadership and decisive action on this matter, which is long overdue. Does he agree that that action sends a clear message to the Jewish communities throughout our country that there is no place in this nation for antisemitism and antisemitic organisations?

Sajid Javid: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. Sadly, as I mentioned earlier, Hezbollah has identified as one of its biggest targets the state of Israel and its people. It has long had a hatred of people who are of the Jewish faith. That is, of course, absolutely unacceptable, and we hope that today’s action will not just send a strong signal, but will help by denigrating this group and making it weaker in terms of support from anyone who might be based in the UK. We hope that it will help to protect our friends in Israel, and give comfort to Jews across the world.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sajid Javid: I will make some progress, but I will give way in a moment.

The extent of Hezbollah’s entire involvement in terror has long been debated in this House. The UK Government first proscribed Hezbollah’s external security organisation in 2001. In 2008 this was extended to include the entire military wing, the so-called Jihad council, and all units operating under it. We took that further by designating
Hezbollah’s military wing under the Terrorist Asset-Freezing etc. Act 2010, and the European Union followed suit in 2013 after six people were murdered in the Bulgarian bus attack. The USA, Canada, the Netherlands, Bahrain and the Gulf Co-operation Council already proscribe Hezbollah in its entirety as a terrorist organisation.

This Government have continued to call on Hezbollah to end its armed status; it has not listened. Indeed, its behaviour has escalated; the distinction between its political and military wings is now untenable. It is right that we act now to proscribe this entire organisation.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): If we have learned anything from the new Labour years it is that proscribing clerics or individual organisations in and of themselves is not enough; it should be part of a wider strategy with allies. So given that we have just had the joint EU-Arab League summit, how many of our allies at that summit intend to follow the Government’s lead?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct that just proscribing a terrorist group is of course not enough; it is part of the toolbox or toolkit that we have to fight terrorism, and there are many other tools we can employ. For example, measures are taken through legislation, such as the recent Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019, to try in other ways to fight terrorism.

The hon. Gentleman asked what other countries, especially at the recent summit, may have followed suit: as I mentioned, the Gulf Co-operation Council, which has many members, has long proscribed Hezbollah in its entirety, and Bahrain has proscribed Hezbollah as well. And I am sure that through today’s action many countries will be interested to know how and why we are taking this action, and we work closely with allies so perhaps they will follow suit.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s decision on Hezbollah, but does he agree that we need to redouble our efforts to cut off sources of financial supply to groups like Hezbollah, which are to do with money laundering and so on, by working with our allies like the US?

Sajid Javid: I very much agree with my hon. Friend, and the reason for example under the Terrorist Asset-Freezing etc. Act 2010 we have taken action against Hezbollah and other proscribed terrorist organisations, and we are always looking to see what more we can do in terms of going after assets and those who help with fundraising. We try to do this work together with our allies, which gives us a much greater chance of success in cutting off financing.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): It is only 13 months since our right hon. Friend the Minister for Security and Economic Crime was in this House having a rather more difficult time of making the opposite arguments around the proscription of this organisation, and I would be extremely interested to know what has changed in the course of the last 13 months, other than my right hon. Friend becoming Secretary of State, for the Government to change their position.

Sajid Javid: That is a good question, and my hon. Friend knows that we will keep under constant review the different terrorist organisations and groups, particularly ones we have proscribed some part of before, and we would look at both secret intelligence and there would be more open source information. For example, my hon. Friend asks what has changed: in terms of open source information it is evident that Hezbollah has got more involved in and drawn into the Syrian conflict, and is responsible for the death and injury of countless innocent civilians.

We will also look at advice from officials. There is a proscription group of officials made up from across Government Departments, not just from the Home Office, but including for example the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and we would listen to their excellent advice. They have made it very clear that Hezbollah is clearly a candidate for proscription because it meets all the tests set out in the Terrorism Act 2000.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I am grateful to the Home Secretary for his detailed answer to the question from the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) about what has changed. In terms of the political changes, is his decision related to the problems of Government formation in Lebanon, where Hezbollah Ministers are having problems trying to form a Government with the Prime Minister? Has that been part of the right hon. Gentleman’s decision making?

Sajid Javid: The short answer to the right hon. Gentleman’s question is no. For a number of years, the UK Government have had a long-standing policy of no contact with Hezbollah and, in a way, that has made this decision more straightforward in terms of any potential impact on Lebanon. Our ties with the Lebanese Government and our support for Lebanon through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development are strong. There has been a need to ensure that those arrangements are compliant with this order, but they remain largely untouched and our relationship with the legitimate Government of Lebanon will remain.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for the decision that he is taking and bringing to the House. My Jewish constituents will warmly welcome the decision, but actually, so will the Christian refugees from Lebanon who have also been targeted and attacked by Hezbollah. We should not forget those individuals. My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) mentioned the al-Quds marches in this country. One of the challenges for the police is that they say they cannot interfere because people claim that the Hezbollah flags they are carrying relate to the political wing of the group. Will my right hon. Friend’s decision ensure that the police will be able to take action against the people parading those flags? Will he also ensure that we freeze all the assets of Hezbollah in the UK and encourage our allies to do the same?

Sajid Javid: To answer my hon. Friend’s last question first, we have already taken steps to freeze the assets of terrorist groups, and we will continue to ensure that that always remains the case. On his first point, he is right to point out that Hezbollah’s victims have been of many
different faiths. There have been Jewish and Christian victims, and many Muslims have been murdered by Hezbollah as well. When it comes to displaying flags, clothing or物品 that might be connected with Hezbollah or any other proscribed terrorist organisation, that will be a criminal offence from now on. This will give the police and the Crown Prosecution Service the ability to act in a way that they have been prevented from doing up to now.

**Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): When the House debated this issue a few months ago, every Back Bencher advocated the full proscription of Hezbollah and it was deeply regrettable that, at that stage, neither Front Bench did so. I welcome the Government’s change of heart, but does my right hon. Friend share my deep regret that it is not shared by those on the Opposition Front Bench?

**Sajid Javid:** I welcome my right hon. Friend’s support, but I will reserve my judgment on the Opposition. I will wait to hear the shadow Minister’s thoughts. However, some Members might already have seen a press release from the official Opposition which suggests that they are against the proscription of Hezbollah. I am sure that is actually not the case, and that the shadow Minister will tell us that that must be some kind of typo and that they are absolutely committed to fighting terrorism because they know that that is what the British people want. In that regard, it would be wise for the Opposition to note that ever since the Terrorism Act 2000, no proscription order that has been brought to this Dispatch Box by any Government, Labour or Conservative, has ever been opposed by the official Opposition. They have supported the banning of every organisation that has been suggested. If it actually turns out that the Labour party objects to the banning of Hezbollah, that will be a first in this Parliament, and the British people will judge that for themselves.

Secondly, the order will proscribe Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen, which is also known at JNIM, its aliases Nusrat al-Islam and Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen and its media arm, known as az-Zallaqa. JNIM was established in March 2017 as a federation of al-Qaeda aligned groups in Mali. It aims to eradicate government and the western presence from the western Sahel region, including parts of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. In their place, it wants to impose a strict Salafist interpretation of sharia law. To that end, it attacks western interests across the region and kidnaps western nationals to raise ransom money. Three civilians and two military personnel were killed in a 2017 attack on a tourist hotspot in Mali. Az-Zallaqa then proudly announces the atrocities and claims responsibility. JNIM is already designated by the US and the UN, and I have no hesitation in doing the same.

Finally, the order will ban Ansaroul Islam and its alias Ansaroul Islam Lil Irchad Wal Jihad. The group wants to take control of the Fulani kingdom of Djelgoodji in Burkina Faso and Mali and to impose its own strict interpretation of sharia law. It announced its existence in 2016 by claiming responsibility for an attack on an army outpost in Burkina Faso that killed at least 12 soldiers. Its methods include attacks on police stations, schools, and public officials. The predominantly Fulani organisation often targets other ethnic groups, leading to mass displacement. Ansaroul Islam is already designated as a terror group by the US, and it is highly likely that it is supported by JNIM. Given its murderous actions, it is only right that we outlaw it in the UK.

**Sir Edward Davey:** The Home Secretary is right to proscribe the two organisations operating in Africa, but is he aware that Lord Anderson of Ipswich, the former independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, said that “at least 14 of the 74 organisations proscribed . . . are not concerned in terrorism and therefore do not meet the minimum statutory condition for proscription.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 17 December 2018; Vol. 794, c. 1642.]

and did the Home Secretary consider de-proscribing organisations that no longer meet that criterion?

**Sajid Javid:** As I mentioned earlier, we keep under review not just which organisations need to be proscribed, but which organisations may need to be removed. Organisations have been removed in the past, and organisations are not added every year, but we keep the matter constantly under review.

I have no doubt all three proscriptions are in the national interest. Under section 3 of the Terrorism Act 2000, I have the power to proscribe an organisation if I believe it is concerned in terrorism. Currently, 74 international terrorist organisations are proscribed under the Act, alongside 14 connected to Northern Ireland that are proscribed under separate legislation. I only exercise the power after thoroughly reviewing all the available evidence. I consult colleagues across Government, intelligence agencies, and law enforcement, and the cross-Government proscription review group supports me in the decision-making process.

Once proscribed, an organisation is outlawed and unable to operate in the UK. It becomes a criminal offence to be a member, to support it or to encourage the support of others. Proscription makes it harder for a banned group to fundraise and recruit, and its assets can become subject to seizure as terrorist property. Those linked to such groups may be excluded from the UK using immigration powers. Once a group is proscribed, it is also an offence to display its symbols in public and to brandish them on flags and clothes to indicate or encourage support. Earlier this month, Parliament passed the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019, which strengthens these powers by also making it an offence to publish an image of such an item and extends extra-territorial jurisdiction so that UK nationals and residents can be prosecuted in our courts for doing so overseas. This will help us further bear down on online propaganda and terrorist grooming, enabling us to act when a foreign fighter uses social media to reach back to the UK to build support for their terrorist organisation.

I take this opportunity to update the House on another order, which I laid yesterday. The order came into effect today and it outlaws aliases of two already proscribed organisations: Daesh and the Revolutionary People’s Liberation party. We will not allow these or any other groups to continue to operate merely by changing their name. Banning these aliases will leave those groups with nowhere left to hide.

I have outlined the terrorist threat posed by these groups. To ignore this would be to fail in our duty to protect our citizens and our allies. It can only be right that we add them to the list of proscribed organisations. The time has come to act, and I will not flinch from...
doing do. Subject to the agreement of this House and the other place, the draft Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) Order 2019 will come into effect on Friday 1 March.

7.50 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am grateful to the Home Secretary for his remarks, and I thank him for the letter he sent to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), the shadow Home Secretary, setting out his decision. I welcome his remarks about the banning of aliases in addition to principal names.

I make it clear from the outset that the Opposition will not be opposing the motion before the House tonight but, as I am sure the Home Secretary would appreciate and fully expect, I will be scrutinising his decisions. Section 3(5) of the Terrorism Act 2000 sets out the parameters of what is deemed to be an organisation concerned in terrorism, which are that it “commits or participates in acts of terrorism, prepares for terrorism, promotes or encourages terrorism, or is otherwise concerned in terrorism.”

I will touch briefly on each of the organisations mentioned by the Home Secretary.

First, from the information provided by the Home Secretary, Jamaat Nusra al-Islam wal-Muslimin—otherwise referred to as JNIM—was established in March 2017 as a federation of al-Qaeda-aligned groups and has operations in northern and central Mali, northern Burkina Faso and western Niger. It has claimed responsibility, as he set out, for a number of atrocities from 18 June 2017 to 29 June 2018.

Secondly, Ansaroul Islam announced its existence in December 2016, and its overarching aim is to establish dominance in northern Burkina Faso and central Mali. It has claimed responsibility for an appalling attack on an army outpost in Burkina Faso that killed at least 12 soldiers. The Home Secretary was clear in his letter that Ansaroul Islam seeks to eradicate the Burkinabe state presence from Burkina Faso’s northern regions.

Thirdly, the Home Secretary has indicated that Hezbollah will now be proscribed in its entirety. Indeed, he gave a brief history. The then Labour Government proscribed its external security organisation in 2001, and its military apparatus was proscribed in 2008.

The Home Secretary rightly said that these orders have never been opposed by any Opposition, and the order will not be opposed tonight. I told the House last year: “The Opposition absolutely condemn the violence, and we continue to support the proscription of the military wing of Hezbollah, which has been the Government’s position.”—[Official Report, 25 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 506.]

I was clear in that condemnation then, and I am again now.

Theresa Villiers: Does the Labour Front Bench support the proscription of Hezbollah in its entirety?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I have just set out the position: we are not opposing the motion. What I am seeking to do is to scrutinise the Government’s position, which is perfectly reasonable.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Ind): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I will make some progress, but I will come back to the right hon. Lady.

The Home Secretary stated in his letter to the shadow Home Secretary: “Hezbollah, as a political entity in Lebanon has won votes in legitimate elections and forms part of the Lebanese Government. It has the largest non-state military force in the country.”

In last January’s debate, the Security Minister said: “We believe that the best way to weaken Hezbollah in the region and further afield is to have a strong state of Lebanon. The stronger the state of Lebanon, which represents multi-faith groups, has a democracy and Speakers of Parliament and recognises the individual religious minorities in the country, the weaker Hezbollah will be. It is not in our interests to have a weak, fractured Lebanon.”—[Official Report, 25 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 512.]

He is of course correct about that.

I totally appreciate the strong views on this matter, and it has previously been the view of the Foreign Office for many years that the proscription of the political wing, which is part of the elected Lebanese Government, would make it difficult to maintain normal diplomatic relations with Lebanon or to work with the Government there on humanitarian issues, including those facing Syrian refugees in part of the country controlled by Hezbollah. The Home Secretary said in his remarks about ongoing diplomatic engagement with the Government of Lebanon that he would be looking at whether it is compliant with the order. I would appreciate him setting out in more detail how that engagement is to continue.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Ind): I just wanted to say to Opposition Front Benchers that British officials can still meet their Lebanese counterparts. As the Home Secretary will perhaps confirm a little later, the explanatory notes to the Terrorism Act 2000 clarify that the arrangement of “genuinely benign meetings” with proscribed groups is permitted. Such meetings are interpreted as those at which the terrorist activities of the group are not promoted or encouraged, for example, a meeting designed to encourage a designated group to engage in a peace process. I think that covers the point that the hon. Gentleman has just made.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am very grateful for the intervention and I am sure the Home Secretary will come back to that in due course. The reason I raised the issue of proscription—

Robert Halfon rose—

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I will finish the point and then come back to the right hon. Gentleman.

We have to make decisions based on clear evidence. I raise that because of course it is for the Home Secretary, on this as with any other proscription decisions of any Government, to demonstrate that their objective, impartial decision is driven by new and clear evidence. I am sure he will be keen to set out that evidence to the House. May I just return to the point made by the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan)? The Security Minister was very clear when we debated this 13 months ago that his concern was that full proscription
could lead to a weak and fractured Lebanon. Clearly that cannot be the assessment of the Home Secretary now and it would be useful for the whole House if he were to set out why he thinks that judgment of the Security Minister has changed from last year.

Robert Halfon: Let me just quote what the “Labour spokesman” said, according to today’s newspapers:

“Ministers have not yet provided any clear evidence to suggest” that there should be a change to proscribing Hezbollah. They then go on to say:

“Decisions on the proscription of organisations as terror groups are supposed to be made on the advice of civil servants based on clear evidence that those organisations fall foul...The Home Secretary must therefore now demonstrate that this decision was taken in an objective and impartial way, and driven by clear and new evidence, not by his leadership ambitions.”

Is that not the wrong way to treat something as serious as this, by turning it into something about party politics? Given that the hon. Gentleman has heard the evidence in the opening speech by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, surely he should get up at the Dispatch Box to say that we are right to ban this terrorist organisation from our country.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I just say to the right hon. Gentleman that I am simply asking what has changed, which is not an unreasonable question. Much of the evidence that has been put forward today we heard 13 months ago, and very concerning it is too. However, I am just asking the direct question: what has changed? I do not see it as unreasonable to provide scrutiny of the decision being taken. I will be clear to the Home Secretary—

Dr Offord: I promised the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) that I would give way to him.

Robert Halfon: I will now go on to—

Dr Offord: I beg the hon. Gentleman’s pardon. My goodness, I of a responsible Opposition.

Today is to scrutinise this decision carefully and hold the working together has enhanced the security of our

Throughout my time in this role, I have worked with the Home Secretary was incredibly generous in taking interventions and we have had a good debate and discussion so far. I shall also be brief because you have asked us to be, Madam Deputy Speaker, and that is the rule under which we are operating this evening.

I join everyone else in praising the Home Secretary for the action he is taking. It is typically strong and clear-sighted of him and it is a powerful demonstration of the values that he brings to the important office that he holds. It is also an important demonstration of the Government’s values in action. The Home Secretary has worked closely with the Foreign Secretary and other ministerial colleagues to bring us to this point.

I listened with great interest to the remarks from the Opposition Front Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), whom I know well. He is intelligent and fair-minded, but I was concerned because, although he is absolutely right that he has a duty to scrutinise, to ask the difficult questions and to ask about the evidence, we did not hear from him a message saying that the Opposition support the action that we are about to take to proscribe Hezbollah in its entirety. It is one thing to say, “We’re not going to oppose it because these measures are never opposed by the Opposition,” and to say, “We have a duty to scrutinise,” but we want to hear from the Opposition that they actively support this important measure.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary covered in some detail the history of the proscription of Hezbollah, its military operations and military wing. Numerous colleagues have made the point that many Government Members, and some Opposition Members, never regarded the distinction between a military wing of Hezbollah and a civilian wing as being anything other than an artificial construct, so we strongly welcome the decision that has finally been taken to ban Hezbollah in its entirety.

The Home Secretary said earlier that Hezbollah laughs at us when we in this House and in the Government try to make the point that there is some distinction. As Hezbollah’s deputy secretary-general Sheikh Naim Qassem himself stated in October 2012:

“We don’t have a military wing and a political one; we don’t have Hezbollah on one hand and the resistance party on the other...Every element of Hezbollah, from commanders to members as well as our various capabilities, is in the service of the resistance, and we have nothing but the resistance as a priority.”

Members will know exactly what Hezbollah means when it talks about resistance: it means Jew hating and Israel hating. Tonight, the Government and this House are taking action to ban Hezbollah in its entirety and to stand up against that kind of vile rhetoric.

8.2 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It is clear that Hezbollah is an organisation that has been intimately involved in terrorist attacks and the killing of civilians, which should of course be met with unequivocal condemnation from the international community and this House. As others have said, in the 2006 war Hezbollah fired thousands of rockets, indiscriminately and at times deliberately, at civilian areas in northern Israel, killing at least 39 civilians, according to Human Rights Watch. In the conflict in Syria, we have seen Hezbollah forces fight alongside Assad’s Syrian Government groups, and we all know the terrible atrocities of which they have been guilty.
Of course, these events take place in a growing climate of antisemitism around the world, which the SNP condemns utterly and unequivocally. We entirely condemn the violent actions of Hezbollah in Israel and Syria. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the Israel-Palestine situation—many of us, including myself, hold serious concerns about human rights violations in the occupied territories and the Gaza strip—and notwithstanding any concerns, they should never be used as any kind of purported justification for attacks on the people of Israel or Jewish people around the world or, indeed, for abuse against them. The SNP and the Scottish Government have consistently condemned obstacles to progress in the peace process—not only indiscriminate rocket attacks on Israel but the continued expansion of illegal settlements in the occupied territories.

As others have alluded to, there was a detailed debate on the topic of the proscription—the full proscription—of Hezbollah in this House on 25 January last year. I had the benefit of reading that debate earlier today and discussing it with my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) who spoke in it. Very serious concern was raised by Members across the House about the statements and beliefs of Hezbollah as a whole, its antisemitism, and its avowed desire for the destruction of the state of Israel. As I have already said, those concerns are shared by the Scottish National Party.

My only purpose in speaking today is to elicit from the Home Secretary precisely what has changed since 25 January last year when the Minister for Security and Economic Crime spoke so eloquently about the history of the proscription of the military wing. He went on to say that, although the proscription of Hezbollah in its entirety was kept under review, the Government at that stage wished to maintain a balance. As was pointed out by my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), I was not sure that the Home Secretary was able to elucidate whether any other countries have changed their position.

As the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) said, it is the role of the Opposition to ask questions and to scrutinise. I am not interested in defending Hezbollah—of course I am not—and I have made my party’s condemnation of its activities crystal clear. I simply wish to elicit from the Home Secretary what specifically has led to the Government’s change of mind since 25 January 2018 so that I might better understand this decision today. I am also concerned that the Home Secretary should clarify for us what specific arrangements he has put in place to make sure that diplomatic channels are kept open—not with Hezbollah, but with the Lebanese Government and Lebanese parliamentarians—in order to maintain stability in Lebanon. I also seek from the Home Secretary a confirmation, which I am sure that he will give me, of the Government’s commitment to use their influence to help revitalise the peace process in the middle east and to find a way to break the terrible political deadlock there and start to move towards bringing an end to the conflict.

### Several hon. Members rose—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Order. I am going to do something very unusual. The Front-Bench speakers have taken far less time than I anticipated, so, with apologies to the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), I will raise the time limit to five minutes.

8.7 pm

**Crispin Blunt** (Reigate) (Con): That makes me the lucky recipient, as I am following my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb).

Plainly, how we deal with Hezbollah has been matter of careful consideration for a long time. I do not think that anyone is in any doubt that the previous position—this differentiation between the military and the political wing—was, as has been made crystal clear by a number of contributions here, a piece of constructive ambiguity. It was exactly that. There were, of course, reasons why the Government created that constructive ambiguity. Those considerations that, until now, have dictated the scale of proscription of Hezbollah should not be lost as we go forward.

Hezbollah is, of course, an important part of the Government coalition in the Lebanon. I think that it provides 13 out of the 68 Members of Parliament in the governing coalition. There are important development objectives, particularly in the south of Lebanon where Hezbollah has the core of its support from the poorer Shi’a communities in the Lebanon. Many of those development projects will be delivered with the assistance of the local authorities and the local councils that are elected there. It will be very difficult for officials from the Department for International Development to deliver those projects in the way that they have been if they suddenly find that they have to identify which local officials are flying a Hezbollah badge to get elected, which is largely necessary in that part of Lebanon given Hezbollah’s political popularity—that is the case whether we like it or not. Our aid programme to that part of Lebanon is extremely important. In particular, the assistance that we have given to Lebanon in dealing with the Syrian refugee crisis means that it would possibly be damaging to British interests if we allowed this proscription to affect the effective delivery of that assistance.

**Mike Gapes** (Ilford South) (Ind): The argument that we should not proscribe Hezbollah in its entirety, to help development projects in Lebanon seems a little bit tenuous. Is the hon. Gentleman arguing that to maintain those development projects in Lebanon, we have to allow an organisation to parade on the streets of our capital city with its terrorist symbol of a gun and to intimidate and threaten the Jewish community and others in our country?

**Crispin Blunt:** No, of course not. I am saying that the considerations that will have led to the United Kingdom’s policy until now—until we make this change tonight—ought to be taken into account. Some of the practical implications of trying to deliver much-needed development assistance, particularly in southern Lebanon to assist with the tidal wave of refugees that have come into Lebanon, displaced by the Syrian crisis, will cause complexity in the delivery of those aid programmes.
We need to take that into consideration and we have to work out how we are going to do so. It has nothing to do with waving flags in the United Kingdom. All I am saying is that there were reasons for our policy until today, and I would not want those reasons to be lost in this consideration. We want to make sure that we do not cripple the co-operative schemes where they exist. I have already referred to the programmes in the south of the country and the municipalities that will contain people elected under the Hezbollah party label.

Of course, the stability of Lebanon is also an extremely important consideration. Anyone who pretends that they understand the politics of Lebanon will almost immediately be demonstrated not to understand it. It is immensely difficult to get under the surface of this. Some of that complexity is known to me from the visits I have made to Lebanon. Perhaps the most impressive one was in 2006, immediately in the wake of the Israeli attack on Lebanon and the destruction of much of its infrastructure. The driver who was assigned to me and two other parliamentary colleagues at the time was a Hezbollah supporter, but his drink of choice was vodka and his occupation of choice was clubbing. That does go to suggest that it is not quite the same religiously motivated organisation all the way through.

Hezbollah has been seen by the Lebanese Shi’a population as being their most effective representative. The history of terrorism that has been associated with it means that we are going to pass this measure. However, we have to engage with the practical reality that Hezbollah does have at the moment, regrettable though that may be, a very significant amount of the popular support in Lebanon. We are going to continue to need to find a way to make sure that that popular support is engaged in the stability of Lebanon, which is also a key British interest.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We are back on to four minutes.

8.13 pm

Dame Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the Home Secretary on bringing this much-needed measure before the House tonight. I am extremely concerned that my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) was unable to give proper, full support to the banning of this terrorist organisation, Hezbollah, in its entirety. Hezbollah is not our friend, and today was a good opportunity to say so.

Terrorism affects our whole society. Hezbollah is a terrorist organisation acting throughout the world. We have heard examples of it causing death and destruction, with the death of 85 people in a community centre in Lebanon. We have heard examples of it causing death and destruction, with the death of 85 people in a community centre in Lebanon. We heard of Hezbollah here in this country and ask Members to think about what happens every single year on the streets of London? It would be appalling if it could be.

I very much welcome the step that the Home Secretary is taking, and I hope that it will have the full support of all Members. Terrorism is abhorrent. Hezbollah is a terrorist organisation. To suggest that it has two separate wings is a fallacy. It is wrong for Hezbollah to operate, kill and maim people and propagate terrorism throughout the world, and that includes what happens here in this country.

Robert Halfon: I thank the hon. Lady for standing up for an honourable Labour tradition of opposing terrorism. Is she aware of the opinion poll conducted by ComRes for the Jewish News that suggested that something like 80% of the public are in favour of banning Hezbollah?

Dame Louise Ellman: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comment. I am aware of that important opinion poll. It is a timely reminder that, while Hezbollah specifically targets Jewish people and Jewish organisations, it affects our whole society. When we consider this issue, we should look at how the terrorist organisation Hezbollah affects our whole society. That is why it is right for the Home Secretary to bring this order before us, and I hope that it is supported by everybody here.

8.17 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): The decision to proscribe Hezbollah in its entirety is long overdue, and I congratulate the Home Secretary on taking this action. I first called for its proscription after I attended a demonstration outside No. 10, when the Prime Minister of Israel was visiting, and I not only heard antisemitic abuse but saw the flying of the Hezbollah flag. I pointed out that not only saw that but was present at the demonstration. I pointed out that out to the gold commander and demonstrated to him that it was a criminal offence under the Terrorism Act 2000. He assured me that he had not only recorded the individuals but that action would be taken later, as his immediate priority was to keep the two factions apart. However, I later found out that the Metropolitan police would not be taking any action because of a Queen’s counsel opinion that there are two wings of the party and therefore no offence had been committed.

I have continued to attend the annual alternative al-Quds rally each year, where I have witnessed further acts of intimidation and inflammatory actions by people waving the flag. In addition, I was proud to present to Parliament a petition of 1,000 constituents, and I helped to deliver to No. 10 a petition from the Israel-Britain Alliance, which is run by Michael McCann, calling for the proscription of Hezbollah.

It was a great disappointment back on 25 January last year when Labour Front Benchers and the Government said that they did not wish to go down this route. I am sure that Members will remember that debate and the
defence given on both sides, but it is worth mentioning the different positions that the Government and the Labour Opposition took. Any Member here who voted against the Terrorism Act 2000, or indeed the Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) Order 2001, is really stretching the bounds of credibility if they come along tonight and say that they actually support this change, when they clearly voted against the legislation.

More importantly, as I am sure many Members will remember—the Home Secretary will not, because he was not Home Secretary at the time—there was the infamous briefing note that Labour Front Benchers gave their Members instructing them not to vote for proscription. The rationale for this was clear: it was, they claimed, a threat to the middle east peace process. The note said:

“Full proscription could be a move against dialogue and meaningful peace negotiations in the Middle East.”

It is worth asking Labour Front Benchers why that position has changed.

I am also concerned with my own Front Benchers, but on this occasion their decision is welcome, and I am not going to question their reasons for doing it. The Government have taken a decision to proscribe Hezbollah in its entirety on the basis that it is no longer tenable to distinguish between the military and the political wings of the organisation, and I welcome that decision. What it actually does is to send out a strong message. By proscribing Hezbollah, the Conservative Government are demonstrating their commitment to anti-extremism and their fight against antisemitism, and it constrains the ability of Hezbollah to operate in the UK. Most of all, it protects community cohesion, and for that, Home Secretary, I salute you.

8.21 pm

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I want to speak very briefly about Hezbollah’s role in Yemen and the human catastrophe it is involved in. There is a clear link between Ansar Allah and Hezbollah in that they are both supported and funded by the Iranian Government in this proxy war. Since the war broke out, the Houthis—Ansar Allah—have unseated the legitimate Government, with the help of Hezbollah in training, expertise, weapons and munitions.

Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah publicly backed the Houthis—Ansar Allah, or the Partisans of God—in a speech on 29 June 2018, saying:

“I, and all my brothers and the resistance in the world...should bow in tribute to those fighters”.

Let us not forget what Ansar Allah’s motto is and what it supports:

“Death to America, Death to Israel. A curse upon the Jews”.

Let us be absolutely clear what it stands for. Furthermore, Hezbollah and Ansar Allah met last August in Beirut. The meeting consisted of Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah and the spokesperson for Ansar Allah—the Partisans of God—Mohammed Abdul Salam.

In this conflict, Hezbollah fighters have been killed on the battlefield in Yemen, and I think this is further testament of its role in this conflict. It is a terrible conflict, which is exacting a huge price on the people of Yemen, and Hezbollah is part of that problem. A lot of this is coming in from an Iranian ship, Saviz, which is moored in the Bab el-Mandeb straits, and it is supported by the Iranian Government.

I will finish with one conclusion. When the peace talks took place in Stockholm, one of the conditions that Ansar Allah asked for in relation to the prisoner transfer was for the injured Hezbollah fighters to be transferred safely to Oman. That was one of the conditions, and it tells us everything we need to know about Hezbollah’s role in the war in Yemen.
than 1,000 civilians in the Ghouta district in the eastern suburbs of Damascus. It has destabilised Lebanon, bringing conflict to its people and murdering its political opponents, and it has conspired with its Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps masters to attack western, Israeli and Jewish targets throughout the middle east, Europe and South America.

I know that this is not the direct responsibility of the Home Secretary, but I now urge the Government to do more to work with our allies and friends in the region to counter the pernicious influence of Iran, the barely hidden hand behind Hezbollah and the source of so much of the violence, sectarianism and terror that plagues the middle east.

8.27 pm

**Sir Edward Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan), who has led this campaign and sought to bring this issue to light, and who I think deserves huge credit for the measure before the House tonight. It is very important that the Home Secretary is proscribing Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin. It is important to recognise the impact that JNIM has had, in terrorist actions in Mali, Burkina Faso and elsewhere in the region. We should worry about that, and he is right to proscribe it.

Of course, the debate is about the change being made on Hezbollah. Everyone, I think, across the House is concerned about Hezbollah. It has had 30 years of terrorist attacks. Moreover, we have seen in the rhetoric of its leaders, particularly Hassan Nasrallah, a completely abhorrent antisemitic vein. For example, he has said:

“The Jews are a cancer which is liable to spread at any moment... If they all gather in Israel, it will save us the trouble of going after them worldwide.”

It is an organisation that everyone should repudiate.

I therefore think that it is right that the Government have kept the proscription of the political wing of Hezbollah under review and sought to bring this measure to the House tonight. However, like the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), I also think it is right that we want to understand on why the change has been made, because Opposition parties have had to listen to the Government and follow them. The Security Minister told the House relatively recently:

“Theyir military wings are proscribed, but as Hezbollah forms part of the Government in Lebanon and Hamas plays an active role in its part of the region as a member of a Government, the proscription applies only to the military wing.”—[Official Report, 19 December 2017; Vol. 633, c. 1008.]

When I intervened—other Members have questioned the Home Secretary on this point—we wanted to know why there has been a change. That is a reasonable request, because all Opposition parties have followed the Government’s position before and obviously we are keen to maintain unity on such measures. That is why these questions are so important. The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West asked those questions, as did the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt).

On 31 January this year, after nine months, the Government of Lebanon formed. In the new Government of Lebanon the Health Ministry is, I believe, held by a Member of Parliament from Hezbollah and the Ministry of Finance has an ally linked to Hezbollah. It is therefore not unreasonable to ask the Home Secretary, given what the Government were saying in this House last year and the year before, what has changed in that political assessment. It is very important that the Home Secretary shares with the House the change in their analysis. If he wants to take the whole House with him, and keep the House and the country together on these moves, he needs to be clearer in that position.

On the process of proscription, in my intervention on the Home Secretary I made the point that the list of proscribed organisations is getting longer and longer. Time moves on and the former independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, Lord Anderson, made it clear that he thinks it needs to be updated and some organisations removed. I hope we can have a bit more from the Home Secretary, if he replies to the debate, on whether he will keep it under review and remove organisations. That is not helpful, given that there are very severe penalties for people who link to such organisations. If organisations should not be proscribed, people should not be in danger of being imprisoned.

Several hon. Members rose—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Order. We have to reduce the time limit to three minutes.

8.31 pm

**Mike Gapes** (Ilford South) (Ind): I took part briefly in the debate in January a year ago, which was secured by my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan). It was very clear at that time that the Government were uncomfortable with the existing position. The Labour Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, had come out very strongly to call for a total ban on Hezbollah—not just the military, but the political wing—following the flags on demonstrations in the centre of London and the slogans that were chanted which were clearly threatening and intimidatory towards British citizens. It seems to me astonishing that the Labour Front Bench is unable to recognise and support the clear call by the Mayor of our capital city that there should be a total ban on Hezbollah.

When we had a Labour Government in this country, we were tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime. It may be that today we are soft on terrorism and soft on the causes of terrorism. One of the causes of terrorism is that we do not confront and challenge the ideologies that drive it. Whether it is terrorism that comes out of hatred of other communities in the United Kingdom or whether it comes out of a warped distortion of a faith, there are, globally, different terrorist organisations and they have to be challenged, confronted and dealt with. People in this country, as well as in other countries, have to be protected. We are facing a real challenge if we do not recognise the need to have tough but fair security measures for our community as a whole. In Britain today, there are people who are afraid because we are allowing terrorist organisations and their supporters to parade, threaten and challenge.

We need to be very clear that the decision we take tonight has to be followed up by action to enforce what we are about to agree. It is no good Parliament legislating and then not enforcing it. The message has to go out to the Metropolitan police and it has to go out to local authorities. It has to go out to different institutions in our country that there is no place for terrorists, terrorist apologists or terrorist organisations in UK society.
Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): It is a genuine pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes). He is still very much my friend and he is one of the most honourable people I have had the privilege to know. There is a long and proud tradition—a strong, proud social democratic tradition—in the Labour party of confronting and facing down murderous, hateful ideology, and I deeply regret that that proud tradition has not found expression at the Opposition Front Bench tonight. But it will find expression on the Back Benches: I am here to support the Government unequivocally and without hesitation, not simply because I have to go back to my constituency and look in the eye the people who sent me here, but because when I go home this evening, I have to be able to look at myself in the mirror, too.

There is no doubt about what the Government seek to ban and confront in the motion. Hezbollah makes no distinction between its political and military wings and it is farcical that this Government and this country, for too long, have drawn such a distinction. We have already heard the words of the deputy secretary general of Hezbollah, Naim Qassem, but let us hear some more. He said that “the history of Jews has proven that, regardless of the Zionist proposal, they are people who are evil in their ideas”. Hassan Nasrallah said “God imprinted blasphemy on the Jews’ hearts”—and: “If we searched the entire world for a person more cowardly, despicable, weak and feeble in psyche, mind, ideology and religion, we would not find anyone like the Jew. Notice, I do not say the Israeli.”

That is what we are up against—that sort of stomach-turning antisemitism. It is the sort of conduct, I am afraid, that in the Labour party gets you a reminder of conduct letter these days, but some of us will not be bystanders to Jew hatred.

Let us look at Hezbollah’s murderous terrorism—the slaughter of innocent people around the world. There is no doubt that Hezbollah is a violent, murderous, barbaric cult and of course, it is right that the Government have therefore taken this decision. It is not just about the operations that it has mounted in its own country.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that while this move sends a message to the world, it is also sends a message to our communities about community cohesion, which is that words have consequences and that politics are as important as the military wing in tackling terrorism?

Wes Streeting: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. It underpins why the decision that the Government are putting before us this evening is, if overdue, very strongly welcome.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I listened very carefully to the words of the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that not opposing the order is just not good enough? We cannot be neutral in the face of an antisemitic terrorist organisation.

Wes Streeting: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. I have not seen a parliamentary Labour party briefing on this topic, which is regrettable. It means that I do not know the lines to take, so I have just had to come up with my own. I say plainly, simply and unequivocally that it is not good enough simply to say, “We won’t be opposing.” We should be making it clear that we would troop through the Lobby and vote for the motion if there is a Division. That is what people across the country and in my constituency want to hear.

Finally, I welcome the fact that Hezbollah flags will not be flown on the streets of our capital city, and I strongly support the Mayor of London’s leadership on this issue, but let us not lose sight of what Hezbollah is doing right now in Syria. Syria Solidarity UK is quite right to say that it is not just about flag waving and what is going on here; we must not lose sight of what is happening in Syria, too. For as long as my constituents send me to this place, I will sit here proudly as a Labour MP from a strong social democratic tradition, standing up for the values that our party was founded to champion.
whether it must also be proscribed. I believe that it should be. Organisations that encourage and mouth off terrorism and radicalise people should face the condemnation that Hezbollah is facing in the Chamber tonight.

8.41 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I also welcome the Home Secretary’s comments today and the action to recognise Hezbollah for what it is. That sends a strong message to the world and those who wish to do us harm that the UK Government abhor terrorism in any form.

As we all know, Hezbollah is a well-funded, powerful organisation that has a history of targeting British interests, including well documented links to attacks on British forces in Iraq. It killed 85 people in Argentina and five Israeli tourists in Bulgaria. A Hezbollah operative with a forged British passport in Cyprus had eight tonnes of fertiliser, to be used to make bombs against Jewish and Israeli targets. According to the CIA, Hezbollah’s secretary general Hassan Nasrallah has a history of being “directly involved in many Hezbollah terrorist operations, including hostage taking, airline hijackings, and attacks against Lebanese rivals”.

I am therefore delighted that our country is now joining the US, Canada, the Netherlands, Israel and the Arab League in proscribing Hezbollah in full.

As well as being involved in international terrorism, Hezbollah plays a central role in the global drugs trade. There has been a wave of recent arrests in Europe of suspects linked to Hezbollah. Does the Home Secretary share my concern about the criminal activities in which Hezbollah operates regularly engage, including drug dealing and money laundering? Will he confirm that proscription will restrict Hezbollah’s ability to undertake such criminal activities in the UK? Is there a force directly tasked with addressing the issue?

Hezbollah has lost some 2,000 fighters in Syria. It has an arsenal of 150,000 rockets and 45,000 fighters, and it has said that its rockets can hit any part of Israel—even Tel Aviv. Does the Home Secretary agree that Hezbollah is one of the most destabilising forces in the region? Yesterday he stated that Hezbollah was continuing its attempts to destabilise the fragile situation in the middle east. We are no longer able to distinguish between its already banned military wing and its political party.

I thank the Home Secretary for making this decision. I think everyone in the House and the other place will already banned military wing and its political party.

Finally, I want to give an opportunity to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), for whom I have a great deal of respect. He is normally very strong on these issues, but the House is silent. I think that the answer is yes, with more than a great deal of respect.

8.44 pm

Sajid Javid: A number of Members have spoken in support of the order, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), my hon. Friends the Members for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) and for Hendon (Dr Offord), the hon. Members for Liverpool, Riverside (Dame Louise Ellman) and for Hyndburn (Graham P. Jones) and the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan), the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey), the two Ilfords—the hon. Members for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) and for Ilford North (Wes Streeting)—and the hon. Members for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon). The hon. Member for North Antrim also spoke passionately about the terrorism in Northern Ireland. I thank all those Members for their contributions.

I want to focus on two clear points. The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) and the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton asked, “Why now?” I will give four reasons. First, there is secret intelligence. I think the House will understand why we cannot share it, but my right hon. Friend the Security Minister met the shadow Home Secretary earlier on Privy Council terms, and was able to share some of that information. There has been plenty of open-source information, especially in the last 12 months, in which there has been a step change in the activity of Hezbollah, particularly in Syria.

The proscription review group—a group of civil servants from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Home Office, the Department for International Development and others—makes an independent, objective assessment of the evidence that it has, and it has expressed the clear view that all these organisations, but in particular Hezbollah in its entirety, meet the definition of a terrorist organisation in the 2000 Act. Both the FCO and DFID have looked again at the work that they do in Lebanon. They are clear about the fact that they can continue that work, and support the legitimate Government of Lebanon and its people.

Finally, I want to give an opportunity to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), for whom I have a great deal of respect. He is normally very strong on these issues, but the House is silent. I think that the answer is yes, with more than a great deal of respect.

It is right that we ban all three terrorist organisations to ensure that they cannot build support in the UK. I commend the order to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 25 February, be approved.

Business without Debate

CHILDREN ACT 1989 (AMENDMENT) (FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION) BILL [LORDS]

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 90(5) and Order of 14 February). That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time and stood committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63(1)).

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 90(6)).

That the Public Bill Committee to which the Children Act 1989 (Amendment) (Female Genital Mutilation) Bill [Lords] is committed shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.
Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): For the convenience of the House, we will take motions 12 to 15 together.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

**EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ATOMIC ENERGY AND RADIOACTIVE SUBSTANCES)**

That the draft Shipments of Radioactive Substances (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 21 January, be approved.

That the Civil Procedure (Amendment) (EU Exit) Rules 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 147), which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.

That the Rules of the Court of Judicature (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.R. (N.I.), 2019, No. 8), which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.

That the Local Elections (Northern Ireland) (Election Expenses) Order No. 118(6)), which was laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.

**EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (SANCTIONS)**

That the draft Local Elections (Northern Ireland) (Election Expenses) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 4 February, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.

NORTHERN IRELAND

That the draft Local Elections (Northern Ireland) (Election Expenses) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.

**SPEAKER’S COMMITTEE FOR THE INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY**

**Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6) and Order of 19 February).**

That, in pursuance of paragraph 2A of Schedule 3 of the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009, Ms Cindy Butts be appointed as a lay member of the Speaker’s Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority for a period of five years from 1 March 2019 to 29 February 2024.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.

8.48 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Thank you for calling me, Mr Deputy Speaker, and thank you for being in the Chair for my first Adjournment debate, which concerns such an important matter.

The UK has a world-class national health service, full of the most fantastic doctors, nurses and support staff. It is a testament to our fantastic NHS that, for decades, we have generally seen life expectancy increase across the country. With increasing life expectancy, however, we have seen a growth in degenerative diseases such as dementia. For families living with a relative with dementia, it is an incredibly difficult experience to see a parent, for instance, lose the ability to talk and forget the essence of who they are. You never forget the first time that they look straight through you, having no idea who you are.

Many families are increasingly reliant on extra care facilities and nursing homes to manage the healthcare needs of their elderly and vulnerable relatives. They will therefore experience the heart-wrenching feeling of visiting dozens of care facilities and wondering if their loved one will be happy and safe there—will the care be good enough? Sadly, my family and I have found out what happens when the answers to these questions is no. While the majority of those working in the care sector are wonderful and deserve medals for the incredible service they provide, there are, as in any industry, those who are not, and who, sadly, prey on the vulnerable.

I am going to now share something that is not at all easy to talk about. Minister, there are some phone calls you never wish to receive, and I can say that one of them is the hushed phone call from a carer who knows your family, who tells you that as a matter of urgency you need to come to the care facility and check on your loved one because they have been hurt. Nothing prepares you for discovering that these injuries in fact happened three days previously and nobody called you, no one alerted you, nobody called an ambulance despite the fact that somebody had a head injury, was on blood thinners and is elderly, and with not a single person—not one—having any answers as to how this may have happened or any proof at all as to how this occurred.

My father has dementia. It started very young and affects a part of his brain that is involved with speech. He is fully aware of everything and even has memory, but his days as a university lecturer would be hard to imagine now were you to meet him, as not only does he not speak, but he can only sing in his mother tongue—which I have never heard him even speak in my lifetime. This makes him extremely vulnerable as he is unable to communicate with those who do not know him. As his children, however, my brother and I can understand his body language and his emotions; we know when he is...
happy, we know when he is sad, and unfortunately we
ow know what his demeanour is when he is deeply,
deply frightened.

He was found extremely distressed by a carer covered
in bloody injuries which would have caused a great deal
of blood loss wherever they had taken place. To our
horror we were told that he had not left the building
overnight, there was no evidence of him having fallen
and no other resident had any evidence of injury. Quite
unexpectedly, the centre manager suddenly left and not
a single person had any excuse for what had happened
or why we were not called. Three days—three days—it
took for us to receive a phone call, which came in the
manner of a hushed call from a carer who was leaving
the very next day. She said she was entirely aware that
we had not been told and deeply thought that we should
know.

As any family would, we complained immediately to
Wandsworth Council, which contracts out the care to
London Care, which manages Ensham House, which is
owned and run by Optivo. I am sad to say that there our
nightmare began, and that nightmare is the reason for
this debate, for if two young professionals can endure
what happened in the following months in pursuit of
answers I fear deeply for the elderly in our community,
such as the 80-year-old woman who herself is frail, who
is caring for her husband with dementia, and who is too
fearful to speak out for fear of going through what I am
about to describe.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the
hon. Lady on bringing this matter to the Chamber. She
and I spoke about it last night, so I had a bit of an idea
of what the issues were going to be. I commend her for
bringing us her personal story and this exposé of what
has happened to her family. Does she agree that the
ability of former owners and management of care homes
that have received bad ratings simply to operate elsewhere
under a new name is not conducive to openness and
transparency, and that consideration must be given to
introducing further and better regulation of the staff,
management and ownership of these homes, which
house some of the most vulnerable people in the UK?
Unfortunately, we have had similar circumstances in
Northern Ireland, and they are heartbreaking for the
families. I understand exactly what the hon. Lady is
saying.

Dr Allin-Khan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his
intervention, and I entirely agree with him. This debate
is about safeguarding all our vulnerable adults, including
his constituents and all the people up and down the
country who want and deserve the very best for their
families.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): The hon.
Lady is making an incredibly powerful speech, and I
congratulate her on securing this, her first, Adjournment
debate. The experience that she is sharing with us speaks
volumes as to why we need to make improvements to
the way in which care homes are regulated, and particularly
to the way in which the complaints and concerns of
relatives are dealt with. This Minister for Care and her
predecessors in the role will know that I have raised
consistently the case of my constituent, Mr John Barrass,
whose mother passed away in a care home in circumstances
that have never, in his view, been satisfactorily explained.

He has fought for eight years to get the answers that he
requires. Does the hon. Lady agree that the points she is
raising illustrate only too well the need to ensure that
there is more transparency and clarity for relatives?

Dr Allin-Khan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his
intervention, and I am sorry that his constituent has
had to live through that for eight years. I know how
terribly difficult it has been to deal with such a situation
for one year. His constituent is very lucky to have him
raising this matter on his behalf again.

From the very first meeting with the safeguarding team
at Wandsworth Council, my brother and I felt as
though we were being put on trial. A new manager from
Ensham House was present, but he had no idea about
what had happened to my father, despite having been
sent the horrific photos of his brutal injuries. The
safeguarding team had not even looked at them. London Care had no answers as to why we were not called, and
again had no answers as to how it could have happened.
It was not until the wonderful police officer arrived, at
my request, viewed the photos and showed visible alarm
at the injury patterns that the Wandsworth Council staff
actually took notice. I would like to extend my thanks
to the fantastic police that we have in Wandsworth and
up and down the country, who give of themselves day
and night to ensure the safety of our community, even
though they often stand up for people for whom they
may never get answers.

It was agreed with Wandsworth Council’s safeguarding
team that a police investigation would now commence,
but it was explained to us that because Optivo housing
association had not placed any CCTV cameras anywhere
in Ensham House other than in the communal areas,
and because my father could not communicate what
had happened to him, it was very likely that we would
not receive the answers we were looking for, and that a
criminal conviction would be very difficult to obtain.
As the police commenced their investigation, we expected
the council to start conducting its own investigation, at
the very least, because regardless of whether there had
been criminal activity, questions needed answering. They
were not answered, however.

In the following months, we found my father bruised
again on two further occasions, with no explanation.
He started to sleep in the communal area, for fear of
being alone in his room. By this time, the Ensham
House care staff knew that we were paying close attention
because we were incredibly concerned, and that is when
they started to attempt to claim that, despite a year of
living there with no issues relating to him, my father was
being difficult. The allegations were not corroborated
by his community psychiatric team or any staff at the
day centre where he spent up to 25 hours a week, and
there had been no record of any issues prior to the first
incident. Relatives of other residents started to tell us
that staff had boasted that they were trying to get dad
out because we were asking too many questions.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I congratulate
my hon. Friend not only on securing this debate, but on
sharing her personal experience. By doing so, I hope
that we will see some change. Where Wandsworth Council
and other councils contract out care to private providers,
does she agree that the right checks and balances must
be in place to ensure that her father’s situation happens
to no one else?
Dr Allin-Khan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that this is about scrutiny, but it is also about saying that a Care Quality Commission rating is not good enough, because fragile patients cannot articulate their needs, fill in forms or speak the truth accurately to a shiny inspection team when a care facility prepares for their arrival.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is brave to make a speech in the Chamber about her personal experiences. Does she agree that one of the most disconcerting things about what has happened to her family is to think about the impact on other families who are not as well informed or as articulate and who do not have a doctor or MP in the family? They will be vulnerable and distraught, but they will not have the opportunity to engage in the same way as my hon. Friend.

Dr Allin-Khan: It is for the very reasons that my hon. Friend so beautifully articulates that I am using this platform to raise this issue. This is no longer about my father; this is about every single member of our society—the veterans who fought in our wars, the older people who worked so hard for us to enjoy the liberty that we have today. I am speaking about this for our families, friends, neighbours, loved ones and the people to whom we owe our lives.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): I join colleagues from across the House in commending the hon. Lady for her incredibly brave speech. I am in awe of how she is articulating her case this evening. As a former co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on dementia, I am conscious of the fact that we are at the start of a ticking dementia timebomb and that more and more people will fall victim to this cruel, horrible disease in the coming years, making them far more vulnerable in their communities than ever before. Does she agree that now is the time to ensure that the right safeguarding measures are in place, both for today and for the future?

Dr Allin-Khan: I thank the hon. Lady—I will call her my hon. Friend—who is tireless in fighting against loneliness and for people to have dignity in their communities, and she makes the most essential of points: we are at the start of a ticking timebomb.

While all this was going on, my father was admitted to hospital one afternoon for a routine issue. As we were undressing him, we found bruises all over his body. Did the Ensham House care staff phone to check on him? No. Did Optivo show any care? No. Instead, we were served an eviction notice, detailing a list of allegations of abuse, despite her failure to investigate London Care against my father without any evidence. How heartless is it to receive an eviction notice while in hospital? What did Wandsworth Council do at this time? Nothing. What was London Care doing? In the space of just five months, London Care had five separate managers at Ensham House. This all started after the first incident with my father. One manager after another came and went, unfamiliar with my father’s safeguarding cases. Some were hostile, others made up incidents involving my father being difficult. Dementia is a degenerative illness, but it does not spiral downwards overnight. Prior to those incidents, as I previously mentioned, not a single issue regarding my father’s difficult behaviour had ever been reported.

In all meetings, it was agreed that the extra care setting was appropriate for my father as he still knew his way around the area, he had a level of independence and my very young daughters felt comfortable visiting him there. Why deny someone their last few months of independence? The extra care setting was deemed by the social services team and everyone involved to be entirely appropriate for him. However, each time we interacted with Ensham House care staff following the first incident in which we found my father beaten, and when we had not been called, we felt as though we were on trial, that we had somehow made up the fact that he was acting afraid, and our concerns were dismissed by a different manager every month.

We found multiple examples of my father’s medication not being written on the drug chart, with London Care saying that he had refused medication when we had seen him take it. We even found one manager had written a note in the staff communication book asking staff to write negative comments about my father in his care notes. The final nail in the coffin, and the point of no return, was when we found my father unconscious on the floor, with blood on the walls and the floor, and a carer’s set of keys left next to him. Following this, he spent one month in hospital.

Four months after that final event in October, there was nothing from Wandsworth Council addressing any of these concerns. The catalogue of disasters crescendoed last week, when the director of adult social services at Wandsworth Council, Liz Bruce—who had refused to look at photos of my father’s injuries, did not know how many open safeguarding complaints there were relating to my father, did not talk to anyone else who knew my dad and had never met him herself—declared that my father had sustained the injuries because “he had asked for it.” Despite police voicing their concerns in the meeting and saying that they cannot rule out abuse, despite her failure to investigate London Care fully and despite her clearly having no detailed knowledge of the case, she chose to use Optivo’s letter, which was full of unsubstantiated claims in the language of the Ensham House managers, as her proof. Well, I think we can all agree that this is a dangerous, highly unprofessional and highly unsatisfactory approach.

Of course it is easier to blame the patient and the family, anything other than looking inwards and accepting responsibility for the fact that the council is awarding care contracts to organisations that are, frankly, unsafe. Quoting CQC ratings in safeguarding communications, when it is well known that patients are fearful to talk, is frankly unacceptable. If this were happening to the UK’s children, the country would be in uproar, and rightly so. Someone living with dementia is just as dependent in their final years as children are in their first years.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dr Allin-Khan: I am just finishing.

With an ageing population and an increase in degenerative illnesses, this issue will only get worse. As parliamentarians we must act now to ensure that even more families do not experience the horror of finding their loved one bruised, bleeding and terrified. We owe it to the elderly in our community. We owe it to the
vulnerable. We have to be their voice. They should not be deprived of their quality of life. We must give our vulnerable a fair chance at ageing safely and gracefully. Their voices must be heard.

9.9 pm

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): I would like to start by congratulating the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) on securing this debate. Her speech this evening has been described as brave, but she took the time out yesterday to talk me through this incredibly distressing case, so she has been brave twice. She deserves all our respect and credit for doing that, because, as has been pointed out by others, she is not just talking about her own individual case, tragic though that is, but by articulating it in such an incredibly courageous way, she is also helping to support others who do not have this opportunity to share their voice and raise their concerns in the same way.

Everyone in this House has the same motivation, which is to ensure that our care services for the most vulnerable people are safe and of the highest quality. The hon. Lady talks powerfully about dementia, which is a priority for me personally. I have experienced what it is like to have a close family member, my grandmother, living with dementia. So many people up and down the country share that experience, and I think we all recognise that a dementia diagnosis is one for not only the individual concerned but their whole family. That is why I am so passionate about the need to ensure that those affected by this condition and others are cared for in the best possible way and that a robust complaints process for redress is in place if their care falls short of that.

It would be bad enough if the terrible situation that the hon. Lady describes were taking place in care homes—that would be disgusting and terrible—but she is talking about an extra care facility. Such a facility is where people have their own self-contained homes; they have their own front doors and their own legal right to occupy. So this is a failure of care in someone’s own home—it is a domiciliary care situation. That is why I am even more concerned about what can happen behind closed doors in an individual’s own house. To have a loved one affected by a degenerative illness is terrible for the individual and a matter of huge worry for their family. So I have previously said in this House that every allegation of abuse and neglect should be thoroughly investigated, with prosecutions brought where this is found.

Alex Sobel: First, I wish to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) for her courage and alacrity in her speech. Some constituents came to me about their mother, who had been sexually assaulted in a care home, not by the staff, but by another patient. I was dismayed to hear that unlike nurseries, care homes have no minimum staffing ratio. Will the Minister look into having minimum staffing ratios in care homes, so that these events do not happen?

Caroline Dinenage: That is a very interesting question. I do not have a massive amount of time left, so I am not going to discuss in full the details of the individual case raised by the hon. Member for Tooting. However, I must reassure her that what she has raised today is something I take very seriously. My officials have informed me that her raising her concerns so effectively and our inquiries from our office as well have prompted Wandsworth Council to hold another meeting today to discuss her case and review the evidence. As a result, there will be an outcomes meeting—

Dr Allin-Khan: Will I be invited?

Caroline Dinenage: It will be held for all parties to consider recommendations going forward and the hon. Lady will be able to attend. We look forward to hearing the outcome, and we will all be keeping a close eye on what transpires.

Tracey Crouch: Does my hon. Friend agree that this is slightly shocking to us all and in particular the family member of the victim in question, who has not been told by the council that this meeting is taking place? In many respects, that is part of the issue raised by the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan): the family of the victim have not been included in any of these discussions or any of this process in the first place.

Caroline Dinenage: That is a very fair point and I am very keen that family members should be involved in the next stage of this meeting going forward. I will be keeping a very close eye on whether that does happen.

In the last few moments available, I want to talk about some of the things we have been doing to protect vulnerable people and some of the actions people can take if, heaven forbid, they find themselves in a similar situation. The Competition and Markets Authority published its care homes market study in 2017, shining a light on some instances of very poor and unacceptable consumer practices in the care homes sector. We accepted all its recommendations and have been putting forward a package of measures to address this. The CMA has also recently published guidance that it provides to care homes on how to meet their consumer law obligations. That has been a key milestone for the sector, and I am encouraged by the commitment some providers have already made to challenge some unfair practices.

Individuals and their families always have a right to complain about the care in a care home or about a domiciliary home care provider. Care homes must make it easy to complain and deal with the complaint quickly and fairly. Any care home that does not meet its obligations is in breach of consumer law, as well as many other things, and could face enforcement action by bodies such as trading standards or the CMA. The CQC encourages the public to share their experience through an online feedback mechanism.

Of course, it is only worth having a complaints system if people know about it and how to access it, which is why, through a joint sector initiative called Quality Matters, we are taking action to improve access to complaints systems and improve the feedback culture in the sector. That is an ongoing piece of work involving the local government and social care ombudsman—to which complaints and concerns about adult social care should be raised—and Healthwatch.
We are committed to preventing and reducing the risk of harm to adults in vulnerable situations. We have made it clear that there is statutory guidance to support the Care Act 2014, and we expect local authorities to ensure that the services they commission are safe and of high quality. We also expect those providing the service, local authorities and the CQC to take very swift action if there are any allegations of abuse, neglect or poor care.

Under section 42 of the 2014 Act, local authorities have a duty to carry out safeguarding enquiries. To aid them in that, they have the power to request information from a provider’s business. The CQC monitors how well providers are giving that information. As part of its inspection regime, the CQC also has to check whether there are effective systems to help to keep adults safe from abuse. The CQC has a duty to act promptly whenever safeguarding issues are discovered during inspections. As the hon. Member for Tooting said, abuse is ultimately a police matter, and if it is suspected, the police must carry out an investigation to determine whether offences have been committed.

We have introduced the new wilful neglect offence specifically to help to eradicate the abuse of people who depend on care services. We have also introduced tougher inspections of care services by the CQC. Thanks in part to this strengthened regime, we have seen a steady improvement in the quality of services, with 83% of adult social care settings now rated as good or outstanding by the CQC. Obviously, every single incident like the one the hon. Lady described and every single concern raised by worried family members makes us want to redouble our efforts to raise the quality. We have been supporting the CQC to understand how it can better hold providers to account where there is any failure.

Let me end by highlighting the hon. Lady’s enormous dedication, representing not only her constituency but the whole country. Whether someone is looking after their own father, mother, husband, wife, son or daughter, we all expect the care provided to be caring and of good quality. We must work and redouble our efforts to ensure that where failure happens, it must be stamped out and cannot be allowed to continue.

9.18 pm

*House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).*
Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—
International Trading Opportunities

1. Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to promote international trading opportunities for Wales.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Nigel Adams): I start by congratulating coach Warren Gatland and captain Alun Wyn Jones on their most magnificent victory in Cardiff on Saturday. Speaking as a proud Englishman, it was a joy to watch the game. There is no better way to kick off Wales Week in London, in which we champion and celebrate everything that is great about Wales, including its rugby team.

The Wales Office works closely with the Department for International Trade on promoting Wales’s trading opportunities. From trade missions to his work with trade commissioners and sitting on the Board of Trade, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State works continually to create potential both for Welsh exports and for foreign direct investment projects to come to Wales.

Mr Jayawardena: I associate myself with my hon. Friend’s remarks, although I preferred the first half.

Many people will have used the M4 this weekend. Given the M4’s potential for promoting international trade in Wales, and indeed in the rest of the country, will my hon. Friend tell me what progress has been made towards honouring the commitment from the 1960s to build the M31 from Reading down to Gatwick Airport, via the M3?

Nigel Adams: I know that my hon. Friend is a great champion for that project, and rightly so. He is right to raise this important issue. The Department for Transport recognises the importance of cross-border connectivity. It has been gathering evidence to inform the second road investment strategy—RIS2—which will govern investment in England’s motorways and major A roads between 2020 and 2025. Economic growth is one of RIS2’s five stated key aims and will play a part in the appraisal of schemes. It will be published in 2019.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I join the Minister in congratulating the Welsh rugby team on their excellent victory. They are on course for the grand slam this year. The Minister will be aware that REHAU plastics in my constituency, which has traded internationally for more than 40 years, has announced its closure. It will now concentrate its business on the European mainland. Will his Department work with the Welsh Government, myself and local government to try to retain those important trading jobs? They are international jobs, and we need them on Anglesey.

Nigel Adams: Absolutely. I have a sneaking feeling that rugby might be a running theme throughout these questions. We recognise the importance of REHAU as an employer in the region and on Anglesey, and we will work closely with the hon. Gentleman and with the company to achieve the best possible outcome, most importantly for the important staff who work there.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): There are many excellent international trading companies in north Wales, but in order to continue to thrive they need access to the most modern digital infrastructure. What discussions is my hon. Friend having with the North Wales Economic Ambition Board to ensure that growth deal funding is targeted towards improving digital connectivity?

Nigel Adams: My right hon. Friend is indeed a great champion of north Wales. I recently met that board to discuss its progress in finalising its proposition to utilise the £120 million that we and the Welsh Government each allocated to the deal. Digital infrastructure is currently an underpinning project, but we have set the region a challenge to go even further and to be even more ambitious about what the project can achieve for the region by working closely with a range of partners, including the private sector.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Short questions and short answers, please.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Jim Callaghan, a Labour Prime Minister, brought thousands of jobs to Ford in south Wales. Why is a Tory Prime Minister taking those jobs away?

Nigel Adams: I politely remind the right hon. Lady that we have record employment in Wales. Tough commercial decisions have been made in recent months, particularly by Hitachi. However, I point to the good economic news in Wales, particularly the record job numbers.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): Dyedd Gŵyl Dewi hapus for Friday, Mr Speaker. I pay my good wishes to Sam on the sad loss of Paul Flynn. This is the first chance I have had to do that. He was a great man. He actually stood in my constituency in 1974.

In January, Dyson announced the relocation of its HQ to Singapore. Hitachi ended its interest in Wylfa and Airbus said it was prepared to leave Wales in the event of a no-deal Brexit. The Government’s handling of Brexit has been described as a “disgrace” by Airbus’s Tom Enders and a “state of total confusion” by tycoon
Sir Martin Sorrell. What message does that send to international investors and traders about trading opportunities in Wales?

**Nigel Adams**: If I might politely say so, the hon. Gentleman is being a little selective with his examples. I would point him to the employment figures. The real figures show that foreign direct investment last year created 3,107 new Welsh jobs, which is a 20% increase. I understand why he might want to paint a gloomy picture. Airbus has made it perfectly clear that it does not want no deal. It wants a deal, and the best thing that he and his party could do is support the deal when it comes before the House.

**Withdrawal Agreement Bill: Legislative Consent**

2. **Angela Crawley** (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): What steps he is taking to secure the legislative consent of the National Assembly for Wales for the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill. [909423]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): This is the first Welsh questions since the sad passing of our friend and colleague, Paul Flynn. He leaves a significant space on the Labour Back Benches.

The Government are engaging extensively with the Welsh Government in preparing the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill. This includes bilateral engagement and meetings of the Joint Ministerial Committees.

Angela Crawley: The National Assembly for Wales backed the Plaid Cymru motion calling for work to begin immediately on preparing for a public vote. A recent poll by YouGov also found that more Welsh voters back a people’s vote than do not. If the Secretary of State is truly Wales’s voice in Westminster, as he so boldly claims, will he outline the preparations he has pressed the Prime Minister for to facilitate a people’s vote?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question, but I would politely point out to her that Wales voted to leave the European Union in even stronger numbers than the rest of the UK. We have an obligation to act on the instruction that comes from that referendum, but in doing so we will continue to work closely with the Welsh Government to ensure and secure a smooth and orderly exit.

Christina Rees: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer, but does he understand that if the UK Government negotiate free trade agreements, for example with the USA, which force hormone-injected beef and chlorinated chicken on the people of Wales without the legislative consent of the elected Welsh Government, that will trigger a major constitutional crisis? Is he prepared to risk that?

Alun Cairns: First, I do not accept the basis of the question, but the hon. Lady raises an important point. We will, of course, continue our warm, constructive and positive engagement with all the devolved Administrations. Our work with the Welsh Government on leaving the European Union has proved fruitful so far. We have laid 120 statutory instruments on behalf of the Welsh Government and at their request. In terms of future trade agreements, we will continue to work with them constructively in the interests of the whole of the UK. Clearly, my interests and their interests will be to defend the Welsh interest. I plan to continue to work with them on that positive basis.

**Leaving the EU: Economic Support**

3. **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on sector-specific plans to support the Welsh economy in the event that the UK leaves the EU without a deal. [909424]

8. **Douglas Chapman** (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on sector-specific plans to support the Welsh economy in the event that the UK leaves the EU without a deal. [909430]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): I meet my counterparts in the Welsh Government on a regular basis, including Baroness Eluned Morgan on Monday, to discuss a range of policy areas. A responsible Government prepare for every eventuality, including no deal, and we continue to work together on operational readiness through the Joint Ministerial Committees.

Gavin Newlands: That is all very well, but the Government’s no-deal assessment made it clear that the impact of a no-deal Brexit on the UK’s food and drink sector would be most damaging in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, where the sector comprises over 5% of those economies compared with just 1.38% in England. How can the Government claim, therefore, that this is a partnership of equal nations when they stand ready to ruin the economies of three, purely in the interests of Tory party unity?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman is quite selective with the data that he points to. He has highlighted one scenario, but if he is happy to take that message so clearly from the sector that he has highlighted, that same sector encouraged him to support the Prime Minister’s
deal with the European Union. When that meaningful vote returns to Parliament, I hope that he will heed that message then.

Douglas Chapman: Will the Secretary of State recognise that 92% of Welsh lamb goes for EU export? Welsh hill farmers have said that if a no-deal Brexit goes ahead, their industry will be decimated and wiped out—a view confirmed in his economic evidence that was published last night. If that is his analysis, will the Secretary of State for Wales act responsibly and make sure that Welsh lamb is protected?

Alun Cairns: I would say similarly to the hon. Gentleman that absolutely, we recognise the importance of Welsh agriculture, as we do all the important employment and economic sectors in Wales. The National Farmers Union and NFU Cymru were strong supporters of the deal with the European Union, so if he is happy to repeat their message today, I hope that he is happy to act on their message when it comes to voting on the meaningful vote in this House.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that agriculture is a very important industry not only for Britain but for Wales—particularly, as has already been outlined, Welsh lamb? What measures could be taken in the event of a no-deal Brexit? Clearly the deal would be the first option, but if there was a no-deal Brexit, how would those difficulties be overcome?

Alun Cairns: My right hon. and learned Friend raises an important point. Agriculture is an extremely important part of the Welsh economy and is disproportionately important there compared with the rest of the UK. We would, of course, act in a way that would protect the interests of that economy to ensure that those jobs are there for the long-term future, in spite of any short-term challenge.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Regardless of whether we have a no-deal Brexit, is my right hon. Friend aware—I am sure he probably is—that it is coming up to the 50th anniversary of the investiture of the Prince of Wales? How can we employ, in that sense of the word, the Prince of Wales’s soft power and so on to promote Wales and the Welsh economy?

Mr Speaker: Irrespective of membership of or departure from the European Union, with which matter we would not want to involve him in any way.

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend makes an important point. As we leave the European Union, there is an opportunity to look outwards, and the Prince of Wales is a great champion of Wales and brings about significant soft power. We rightly recognised him last year by renaming the second Severn crossing the Prince of Wales bridge. I pay tribute to Her Majesty the Queen, who will host a reception next week to mark the 50 years since the Prince of Wales was named such.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The voice of Ogmore will be heard, but I see a great phalanx of men standing and only one female Member. Jo Stevens must be heard!
10. [909432] Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): My constituent’s restaurant business is under threat because of this Brexit chaos. His Polish and Hungarian staff, who have been with him from the start, have left, and the pound is plummeting, causing huge challenge to him. Does the Secretary of State believe that this chaotic Brexit is really making Wales a more attractive place for visitors?

Alun Cairns: There is absolutely no reason why those employees should have left, because we have respected their rights. I only hope and wish that as we continue to negotiate, all the rights of UK nationals living in the European Union will be respected in exactly the same way. The hon. Lady voted against the Prime Minister’s deal with the European Union, and by doing so she is making no deal far more likely. So I would encourage her to look objectively at the data, and to support the meaningful vote when it comes up.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): What discussions has my right hon. Friend had with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy about relocating the resources that are concentrated on Victoria Street into Wales and into Scotland?

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend makes an important point. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office already has an agenda to take as many jobs as possible out of Whitehall and relocate them across the rest of the UK on an ongoing basis. Leaving the European Union will bring new responsibilities. I think there is an opportunity for my hon. Friend’s constituency, and I shall be seeking to play my part in ensuring that Wales benefits too.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): In respect of Welsh business preparation for Brexit, can the Secretary of State tell me how many of the hundreds of Government Brexit work streams have been allocated exclusively or primarily to the Wales Office?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Wales Office sits and acts right across the whole of Government, but my prime lead is with the Welsh Government. We have now ensured that they sit on the European Union Exit and Trade (Preparedness) Sub-Committee, and as I mentioned earlier, I only hope that they will similarly invite a UK Government representative to sit on their equivalent Committee.

Policing Budgets

5. Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of changes to policing budgets since 2015 on the effectiveness of Welsh police forces.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Nigel Adams): The Government understand that police demand is changing and becoming increasingly complex. That is why, after speaking to all police forces in England and Wales, we have provided a comprehensive funding settlement that increased total investment in the police by over £460 million in 2018-19.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: By 2019-20, Gwent police will have seen a 26% cut in its core Government grant compared with 2010-11. Why do this Government keep making it more difficult for Gwent police to keep my constituents safe?

Nigel Adams: I remind the hon. Gentleman that the 2019-20 settlement provides total funding of up to £14 billion, and it is an increase of up to £970 million on the previous year. I would also politely remind him that the Labour party voted against that increased funding.

Industrial Strategy

6. Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the effect of the industrial strategy on the Welsh economy.

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): The industrial strategy provides a platform for the Welsh economy to thrive, and we have been working closely with the Welsh Government to ensure that we make the most of the opportunities available. We are already delivering a wide range of projects in Wales, such as through the industrial strategy challenge fund, for which Wales is scoring well above its population share.

Chris Evans: If you will allow me, Mr Speaker, I would like to pay tribute to my parliamentary next-door neighbour, Paul Flynn. The unique, unforgettable parliamentarian he was will be missed by all in this House.

I wonder whether the Secretary of State is concerned by the news that the Welsh Automotive Forum says that once Honda stops production in Swindon, 12 companies based in Wales will be affected by that decision. If he is worried, what will he do for those small and medium-sized enterprises to open up new markets?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman has raised an important point. I was in Japan last week when the ambassador received the news. It is necessary to recognise that this is nothing to do with Brexit; it is about changing market habits and about Honda’s changing approach. We have already been in touch with the Welsh Automotive Forum and are engaging positively with its members. The hon. Gentleman is right about the number of companies, but the exposure is more limited than it might initially suggest.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): In terms of the industrial strategy, does the Secretary of State think that the chronic M4 congestion around Newport, which snarled up the England rugby team coach last Friday, was part of a cunning plan to give Wales the edge, or just a consequence of 20 years of failure on the part of a Welsh Labour Government, who cannot build a road?

Alun Cairns: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Even the Welsh coach, Warren Gatland, said to Eddie Jones that he would never have travelled through Newport at that time of day because of the congestion in the area. That might be light-hearted, but the reality is that the problem is causing serious reputational damage to Wales.
The plan is available and makes a positive recommendation, and the money is available from the Treasury. I wish that the Welsh Government would just get on and deliver the road.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I am sure the House will join me in welcoming the serendipity of the alignment of stars whereby in every year ending in “9” since 1949, Wales has beaten England.

Wylfa Newydd was a key development underpinning north Wales growth deals. Now that Hitachi has pulled the plug on Wylfa, what is the Secretary of State doing to secure additional funding, specifically infrastructure investment, over and above the £120 million currently committed by the Government?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Lady has asked an important question, but Hitachi has paused the project and is maintaining the development consent order. It has not pulled the plug. When I met the chairman last week, he was keen to continue to engage. We will look open-mindedly at the north Wales growth deal, but it is of course a matter for local authorities and businesses to submit bids to me so that I can consider them in due course.

Liz Saville Roberts: What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the potential use of Crown Estates revenue income from Wales, or other Treasury funds to support the development of energy infrastructure, and specifically to develop the tidal stream energy sector in Pembrokeshire, Llŷn and Ynys Cybi?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Lady has given some excellent examples of projects that could well gain support through the north or the mid Wales growth deal or the Swansea city deal. Those are the sorts of projects that I should like to explore, but of course they are bottom up. Working with the hon. Lady and with local partners, I shall be happy to see what we can do.

Journey Times: Chepstow to Gloucestershire

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on plans to reduce journey times between Chepstow and Gloucestershire.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Nigel Adams): We have regular discussions with the Welsh Government about cross-border roads, including the proposed A48 bypass around Chepstow. We know that a bypass could improve journey times between Chepstow and Gloucestershire as well as reduce air pollution, and we look forward to working with the Welsh Government to deliver this vital piece of infrastructure.

David T. C. Davies: There are times when a drive through Chepstow resembles the rush hour in Lagos or Mexico City. Will Ministers therefore do everything that they can to encourage the local authorities in Gloucester, the Welsh Government and the Department for Transport to work with Monmouthshire council to deliver that bypass as soon as possible?

Nigel Adams: There is no greater champion and voice for Chepstow than my hon. Friend. The Government are dedicated to improving transport infrastructure across Wales, for instance by providing a new relief road. We have abolished the tolls over the Severn, and I know from personal experience on Saturday that Chepstow could do with a bypass.

Mr Speaker: I call Ian C. Lucas.

Mr Tamanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Order. The hon. Gentleman must resume his seat. He is a fine man and Slough is a very good place, but it is a long way from Chepstow or Gloucestershire. If the inquiry consists of one sentence and relates either to Chepstow or to Gloucestershire, I will hear it. If it is about Slough, he must remain seated. Blurt it out, man.

Mr Dhesi: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The western rail link to Heathrow will significantly reduce the journey time between Wales and the airport. The Government committed themselves to the link in 2012. When will it finally be built?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Gentleman—who has been incredibly creative in getting his question in under Chepstow—will be pleased to hear that we are continuing to engage with the Department for Transport on this vital project.

F-35 Contracts

9. Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential effect of F-35 contracts on (a) industry and (b) exports from Wales.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Nigel Adams): Again there is no stronger voice for Wales than that of my right hon. Friend, who has a long-standing interest in Wales. Yesterday I met the Minister with responsibility for defence procurement, my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) to discuss the F-35 contract. The recent announcement puts Wales right at the centre of the global F-35 partnership. It is the largest defence programme in history.

Greg Hands: It was a great pleasure to visit the F-35 factory in Fort Worth in the summer of 2016, and of course the F-35 has a huge UK content to it, so does my hon. Friend agree that these contracts show the immense contribution being made by the Welsh defence industry to the UK economy and exports overall?

Nigel Adams: The aerospace and defence industries are in very good health in Wales. In the financial year 2017-18, the UK Government spent £960 million with the Welsh defence industry and commerce; that is up from £946 million. This supports an estimated 6,300 jobs in Wales and the half a billion pound F-35 contract is to be welcomed right across this House.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Will the Minister meet with aerospace businesses such as Tritech, Magellan and Solvay in Wrexham to ensure that in the event of a no-deal Brexit we maximise spend within the UK to benefit our businesses?

Nigel Adams: I certainly would agree to meet with the aerospace industry. I have already visited a number of companies. I am also committed to holding a roundtable on this very subject and I am more than happy to meet the hon. Gentleman as well to discuss this further.
12. [909434] Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Given the huge challenges that the steel industry and car manufacturers face in Wales, as well as in the rest of the UK, even at this late stage, would it not be better if the Secretary of State and the rest of the Government committed Britain to staying in the customs union?

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): The hon. Gentleman raises this issue on the European Union. He voted against the Prime Minister’s deal. That makes no deal far more likely. The only way to secure a smooth, orderly exit from the European Union is to support the Prime Minister’s deal when the meaningful vote comes back to this House.

Mr Speaker: Since the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) is conscious that he has a question on the Order Paper, he can have it.

RNLI New Quay

13. Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Transport on the future of the RNLI lifeboat in New Quay. [909435]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Nigel Adams): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his work on this important issue. The UK Government do not anticipate that the RNLI’s decision to replace the all-weather lifeboat with the Atlantic 85 vessel will have an impact on its capability to co-ordinate search and rescue in Cardigan bay.

Ben Lake: I thank the Minister for his answer. He will be aware that the decision to remove the all-weather lifeboat from New Quay has caused considerable concern in Ceredigion and further afield. May I ask him to again raise this matter with the Department for Transport and press for detailed reassurances that the removal will not diminish search and rescue capabilities in Cardigan bay?

Nigel Adams: I am more than happy to work with the RNLI and to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss his concerns to ensure there is proper and correct lifeboat coverage in Cardigan bay.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [909472] Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 27 February.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): May I first say that the UK is deeply concerned about rising tensions between India and Pakistan and urgently calls for restraint on both sides to avoid further escalation? We are in regular contact with both countries urging dialogue and diplomatic solutions to ensure regional stability. We are working closely with international partners, including through the UN Security Council, to de-escalate tensions and are monitoring developments closely and considering implications for British nationals.

Mr Speaker, I understand that Eve Griffith-Okai in your office retires at the end of the week. She has worked for four Speakers and I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in wishing her the very best for the future.

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

Mr Sharma: I thank the Prime Minister for her initial response. In the face of her total failure to secure the agreement of this House, when will the Prime Minister call time on this farce, extend article 50 and put her deal versus remain back to the people?

The Prime Minister: First, I made a statement and answered 82 questions on these issues in the House yesterday. We will be bringing the meaningful vote back by 12 March. As I said yesterday, if that meaningful vote is rejected again by the House, we would have a vote in this House on 13 March on whether the House accepts leaving without a deal on 29 March. If the House rejects leaving without a deal on 29 March, there would be a vote on a short, limited extension to article 50. On the hon. Gentleman’s final point, I continue to believe that it is right for us to deliver on the result of the referendum that took place in 2016.

Q2. [909473] Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): The 2017 Birmingham bin strike led to mass fly-tipping across the borough border in my beautiful town of Solihull. With the threat of another strike ever present, will the Prime Minister join me in urging Birmingham City Council to do what often seems to be beyond it—namely, to be a good neighbour and sort out these strikes, which seem to be just a taster of what would happen under a hard-left Labour Government?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, this is a matter for Labour-controlled Birmingham City Council to resolve: rubbish piling up on the streets because of the failure of the Labour council to get a grip. Not only does it show what a hard-left Labour Government would be like; it shows all of us that, under Labour councils, you pay more and get less.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): There is an urgent question coming up on Kashmir, but I will just say that from our side of the House we strongly support rapid dialogue between India and Pakistan in order to reduce the tension and deal with the root causes of the conflict before more lives are lost.

I also join the Prime Minister in wishing Eve a very happy retirement, Mr Speaker. She has been absolutely brilliant in your office over the many years of people rushing in and out and making totally unreasonable demands. She has always sorted it out. Could you pass on to her the thanks of lots and lots of Back Benchers over many years?

The Bank of England forecasts that growth for this year will be the slowest in over a decade. Does the Prime Minister blame her shambolic handling of Brexit or her failed austerity policies for this damaging failure?

The Prime Minister: First, I think the right hon. Gentleman should have seen the report that actually showed the expectation that in this country over the coming year we will have higher growth than Germany.
He talks about the economy, so let us just say what we see in the economy under a Conservative Government: more people in work than ever before; unemployment at its lowest level since the 1970s; borrowing this year at its lowest level for 17 years; and the largest monthly surplus on record. Conservatives delivering more jobs, healthier finances and an economy fit for the future.

Jeremy Corbyn: I know that the Prime Minister is very busy—I understand that—and she possibly has not had a chance to look at the Bank of England forecasts, which suggest that there is a one in four chance of the UK economy dipping into recession. Manufacturing is already in recession, and manufacturing has declined at the steepest rate for a decade—down 5% in the past quarter alone—and Honda, Jaguar Land Rover and Nissan have announced cuts to either jobs or investment in recent months. Does she blame her shambolic Brexit or her Government’s lack of an industrial strategy for this very sad state of affairs?

The Prime Minister: I have just explained to the right hon. Gentleman the positives in the economy and the consistent quarter-by-quarter growth that we have seen under this Government. What do we know would be the worst thing for the economy in this country? It would be a run on the pound, capital flight and £1,000 billion of borrowing under a Labour Government.

Jeremy Corbyn: As manufacturing industry declines, it is skilled well-paid jobs that are lost. But the Prime Minister is right—there is something that is increasing, and that is the income of the top fifth richest people in this country, which went up by 4.7% last year while the incomes of the poorest fell by 1.6%. With the poorest people worse off, will the Prime Minister now commit to ending the benefit freeze, or does she believe that rising poverty is a price worth paying?

The Prime Minister: Perhaps it might again help to look at some of the facts. The top 1% are paying 28% of income tax, which is higher than at any time under a Labour Government, income inequality is lower than ever before—3.5 million more than in 2010? We know that a child growing up in poverty, and the Resolution Foundation said last week that UK child poverty was on course to hit record levels. Will the Prime Minister act to prevent that? Will she start by ending the two-child limit? Will she end the benefit cap? Will she restore the 1,000 Sure Start centres that have been lost under her Government?

Jeremy Corbyn: Can I just give one example of what is happening? Take the food bank in Hastings, which is represented by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, where demand went up by 80% after universal credit was rolled out, and the Trussell Trust said that a significant proportion of referrals are related to benefit changes, delays or sanctions. It is a huge increase in food bank use.

Some 4.1 million of our children are growing up in poverty, and the Resolution Foundation said last week that UK child poverty was on course to hit record levels. Will the Prime Minister act to prevent that? Will she start by ending the two-child limit? Will she end the benefit cap? Will she restore the 1,000 Sure Start centres that have been lost under her Government?

The Prime Minister: We want to ensure that we have a welfare system that is fair not only to those who need to use it, but to all the hard-working taxpayers whose taxes actually pay for the welfare system. The right hon. Gentleman talks about child poverty, but absolute child poverty is at a record low. We know that a child growing up in a home where all the adults work is around five times less likely to be in poverty than a child in a home where nobody works. Under this Government, the number of children in workless households is at a record low. So, when the right hon. Gentleman stands up, will he recognise that work is the best route out of poverty and welcome the fact that we now have more people in work than ever before—3.5 million more than in 2010?

Jeremy Corbyn: It clearly is not working, because so many people who are themselves working very hard, some doing two or even three jobs, have to access food banks just to feed their children. The Prime Minister used to talk about the “just about managing.” Well, they are not managing anymore. Income inequality—up. In-work poverty—up. Child poverty—up. Pensioner poverty—up. Homelessness—up. Austerity clearly is not over. People on low incomes are getting poorer, while those at the top are getting richer. The economy is slowing, manufacturing is in recession and this Government’s shambolic handling of Brexit—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman will not be shouted down. It is not going to happen. The attempt is foolish and it demeans the House. Stop it. Grow up.
Jeremy Corbyn: Austerity clearly is not over. People on low incomes are getting poorer, while those at the top get richer. The economy is slowing, manufacturing is in recession, and this Government’s shambolic handling of Brexit is compounding years of damaging austerity. Their policies are driving people to food banks and poverty in the fifth richest economy on this planet. Are any of these burning injustices a priority for the Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: Manufacturing is not in recession, and what the right hon. Gentleman says about the lowest earners is not the case. If he had listened to my earlier answer, he would know the lowest earners have seen the highest rise in their pay for 20 years as a result of the introduction of the national living wage—the national living wage introduced by a Conservative-led Government.

If the right hon. Gentleman is talking about actually helping people who are in work, let us talk about the fact that we have cut income tax to help people to keep more of what they earn. We have frozen fuel duty to help people for whom a car is a necessity, not a luxury. Since 2010, those measures have saved working people £6,500.

From the way the right hon. Gentleman talks, one might think that he would have supported those measures. But what did he do? No, he voted against them over a dozen times. That is the reality: it is working people who always pay the price of Labour.

Q5. [909476] Stephen Crabb (Pendine Pembrokeshire) (Con): For rural areas, access to emergency care is hugely important, with distances and journey times crucial. Does the Prime Minister therefore agree with me and the 40,000 Pembrokeshire people who signed the petition against proposals to remove accident and emergency services from the local hospital that the Welsh Government need to look again and ensure that communities such as mine are not left with second-class services that put lives at risk?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this issue. Obviously I recognise the concern those people feel, particularly those who live furthest away from the planned new hospital. As he says, health is a devolved matter for the Labour Welsh Government, but I urge them to consider fully the impact of the changes on local residents. We want to ensure that people can access the services they need, wherever they live in the United Kingdom.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I am sure the House will want to join me in welcoming the president of the Dutch Senate and the Dutch parliamentarians who are with us. Goedemiddag. Hartelijk welkom, dames en heren.

Some 100,000 jobs in Scotland are under threat from a no-deal Brexit. The Scottish Government’s top economic adviser has warned that it could create a recession worse than the 2008 financial crisis. The Prime Minister must rule out no deal right here, right now. Why is she still blackmailing the people of this country?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman might not be surprised if I point out to him that there are only two ways to ensure that no deal is taken off the table. [Interruption.] It is no good SNP Members shaking their heads or muttering from a sedentary position. They need to face up to the fact that we will not rejoin article 50 because we are leaving the European Union, so the only way to take no deal off the table is to vote for the deal.

Ian Blackford: I think it will be for Parliament to decide, and of course there are other options: we can extend article 50 and we can have a people’s vote. The Prime Minister should look at the faces of her colleagues; she is fooling no one. Parliament will not be bullied into a false choice between accepting her very bad deal or no deal at all. MPs from Scotland must now decide: will they stand up for Scotland or will they stand up with the extreme Brexiteers on the Tory Benches? Today, the Scottish National party will move an amendment to rule out no deal in any and all circumstances. Scottish MPs can back the SNP or betray voters in Scotland. Will the Prime Minister finally end this Brexit madness and vote for the SNP amendment tonight?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about an extension to article 50 or a second referendum, but that does not solve the problem—it does not deal with the issue. The issue is very simple: do we want to leave with a deal or without a deal? That is the question that SNP MPs and every other MP will face when the time comes. He then talks about betraying voters in Scotland. I will tell him what has betrayed voters in Scotland: an SNP Scottish Government who have raised income tax so that people in Scotland are paying more in income tax than people anywhere else in the UK; an SNP Scottish Government who have broken their manifesto promise and raised the cap on annual council tax increases for homeowners; and an SNP Scottish Government under whom people are facing the prospect of an extra tax for parking their car at their workplace. And all of that—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is a fest of undignified arm-waving, and bellowing. Mr Kerr, from a sedentary position. Calm yourself, man. Take some sort of soothing medicament that you will find beneficial.

The Prime Minister: And all of that in a year in which the Scottish Government’s block grant from Westminster went up. The people betraying the people of Scotland are the SNP Scottish Government.

James Cleverly (Brainintree) (Con): Yesterday, we heard of the horrific antisemitic attack on an elderly Jewish gentleman in north London. Tonight, right hon. and hon. colleagues from across the House will be breaking bread with the Community Security Trust, a charity that exists to defend against antisemitic violence. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we can never be blasé about antisemitism, we can never be tolerant of antisemitism, and the Labour party can never be too apologetic about antisemitism?

The Prime Minister: First, I join my hon. Friend in recognising the work done by the Community Security Trust. It does such important and valuable work throughout the year, and I am pleased that the Government are able to support the work it does. He is absolutely right to say that one can never be too apologetic about antisemitism, but I think what we have heard sums up Labour under
Layla Moran: One homeless person dying on our streets is enough for national shame, yet the latest figures show that in 2017 nearly 600 died. In that same year, the Vagrancy Act 1824 was used more than 1,000 times to drag homeless people before our courts. Crisis, Centrepoint, St Mungo’s and MPs on both sides of this House agree that it is time to scrap this law. Will the Prime Minister consider meeting us and the charities so that we can make the case for why we should not wait one more day?

The Prime Minister: As I think I indicated in Prime Minister’s questions last week, the number of people sleeping on our streets has gone down for the first time in eight years, but of course there is more to do. On the wider issue of homelessness, there is more to do in terms of building more homes, and we are doing that. I will ensure that the Minister from the relevant Department meets the hon. Lady to discuss the matter.

Robert Neill: Residents of Northpoint House in Bromley in my constituency have aluminium composite material cladding on their building. They are paying out £5,000 a week for a waking watch, repairs and remediation will cost £3 million, and their fire brigade enforcement notice expires on 30 April. The flats are valueless, so the residents cannot raise the money against them. Despite personal intervention by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, for which I am grateful, the freeholders and the developer refuse to accept liability. Under the circumstances, will the Government accept that it may be necessary to intervene directly to ensure that the innocent flat-owners are not out of pocket?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important issue. I know that, as he said, he has been in touch with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, as well as the Treasury. As I have said previously, we fully expect building owners in the private sector to take action, make sure appropriate safety measures are in place, and not pass costs on to leaseholders. We have written to all relevant building owners to remind them of their responsibilities. They must do the right thing: if they do not, we are not ruling anything out. I should also point out to my hon. Friend that local authorities have the power to complete works and recover the costs from the private owners of high-rise residential buildings. I am sure that a Minister from MHCLG would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to continue to discuss this matter, to ensure that the residents are given the peace of mind they need by the action being taken.

Caroline Lucas: One homeless person dying in the UK every day is simply not good enough. We have seen the same shocking figures year after year. The Government have just decided that in the event of a no-deal Brexit, imports of medical supplies are to be handled by the same company that forced hundreds of restaurants to close because it was incapable of delivering chicken to Kentucky Fried Chicken. It is horrifying that the Prime Minister’s stubbornness is literally putting people’s lives at risk through bargain-bucket supply deals. What guarantee can she give patients who are watching us now, looking at the pantomime and farce in this House, that they will be able to get their vital medicines when they need them in the event of that no-deal Brexit?

The Prime Minister: The Department of Health and Social Care is taking the steps necessary to ensure that medicines are available. We have been clear before that it is not necessary to stockpile and that patients should not be stockpiling medicines. Medicines will be available. If the hon. Lady is so concerned about the impact of no deal—

Caroline Lucas indicated dissent.

The Prime Minister: Is it no good the hon. Lady shaking her head. There is a very simple answer: if she does not want no deal, she should support the deal.

Robert Halfon (Harlow): Yesterday, The Sun newspaper reported on proposals for a £1.6 billion post-EU fund for deprived areas in the north, predominantly in seats held by Opposition MPs. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that money from the fund is available to constituents like mine in Harlow, where we have significant deprivation and disadvantage?

The Prime Minister: We will be introducing a fund to ensure that our towns can grow and prosper. The details will be announced in due course by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, I can confirm to my right hon. Friend that Harlow, and indeed other towns across England, will be able to propose ambitious plans to help to transform their communities. Of course, we will work with the devolved Administrations and in Northern Ireland to ensure that towns in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland also benefit from town deals.

Sir David Crausby (Bolton North East) (Lab): As a former shop steward and works convenor, I completely understand the need to approach the cliff edge in order to secure a deal, but rational negotiators never go to the edge, hold hands and jump into the abyss. When will the Prime Minister recognise that constructive discussions should take place without the nuclear option of mutually assured destruction?

The Prime Minister: Constructive discussions are taking place. This House was clear on what it wanted to be changed in relation to the withdrawal agreement and the deal that we had brought back from the European Union, and we are making progress and having exactly the constructive discussions the hon. Gentleman talks about.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): Public trust in politics is dangerously low. Failing to honour and deliver the EU referendum result cannot be an option. I campaigned to remain, but I am
The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question and for the work that he has done on this issue with the hon. Member for Swansea East. It is accepted across the House that it is not right that grieving parents have to worry about how to meet the funeral costs when they have lost a child. As he knows, we have confirmed that parents will no longer have to meet the cost of burials or cremations. Fees will be waived by local authorities and paid for by the Government. The relevant Ministries have been working on the most effective way to deliver this, and I can confirm that the fund will be implemented by the summer.

Q10. [909481] Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): In the past few months in my constituency, a 98-year-old man was killed in an aggravated burglary, an Asian couple were robbed, held hostage and beaten in their home, schoolchildren were mugged at knifepoint, and a spate of burglaries were committed across Enfield Southgate. My constituents do not feel safe. Does the Prime Minister recognise the severe consequences of underfunding our police service, and will she commit to restoring funding for community policing to pre-2010 levels?

The Prime Minister: Of course we recognise the concerns about serious violence, which is why my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has brought forward measures such as the Offensive Weapons Bill and set up the serious violence taskforce. In relation to funding for the police, the Metropolitan police will receive up to £2.5 billion in funding in 2019-20, which is an increase of up to £172 million on 2018-19. If the hon. Gentleman also wants to ask questions about funding for police in London perhaps he should speak to the Labour Mayor of London.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): With the Government’s review of higher education still under way, does the Prime Minister agree that the reintroduction of maintenance grants is one outcome that could clearly aid social mobility for more disadvantaged students?

The Prime Minister: I recognise that my right hon. Friend has been, and continues to be, a huge champion for social mobility. She is asking me to provide a solution to higher education funding and student finance before the Augar report has been received and published. All I can do is assure her that Philip Augar and his panel are working on the report and we will look seriously at the proposals they bring forward.

Q12. [909483] Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): In my constituency of Jarrow there is a wonderful young lady, four-year-old Harriet Corr, whose life would improve dramatically if she had access to the cystic fibrosis drug Orkambi. It is available in Ireland and many other European countries, and is due to become available in Scotland. Will the Prime Minister intervene personally in the negotiations between the NHS and Vertex to ensure that Harriet’s family and many other families are not forced to leave their homes and move elsewhere?

The Prime Minister: I am sure the whole House will recognise the concerns of Harriet and her family. We want to ensure that patients have access to the most
effective and innovative medicines, but obviously at a price that represents value to the NHS. NHS England has proposed its best ever offer for a drug. This offer is the largest ever commitment of its kind in the 70-year history of the NHS, and would guarantee immediate and expanded access both to Orkambi and the drug Kalydeco for patients who need it. We have been closely following the discussions, and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has offered a meeting with the global chief executive officer of Vertex, NHS England and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence in an effort to move the situation forward for the benefit of patients.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware that five years ago today Russian special forces seized the Government building in Crimea and raised the Russian flag? Will she confirm that the UK Government remain committed to the restoration of Ukrainian sovereignty over Crimea, and will she look at strengthening sanctions against Russia until that can be achieved?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to give my right hon. Friend that confirmation. This was an illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia, and we have been doing everything we can to ensure that the appropriate sanctions are imposed that will have an impact. We have been one of the voices around the EU Council table that has been advocating the roll-over of sanctions at every stage and ensuring that, as we look at the actions of Russia here and elsewhere, we enhance those sanctions and rightfully put pressure on those who are responsible.

Q15. [909486] Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): The Scottish Government have used their powers to increase carer’s allowance to the level of jobseeker’s allowance, yet this top-up is being undermined because carer’s allowance is regarded as income under universal credit. If carer’s allowance is meant to help cover the extra costs incurred by providing care, why are carers on universal credit being penalised?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady knows full well the way in which universal credit operates to encourage people into work, but I will ask the Minister in the relevant Department to write to her on this matter.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Thousands of young girls—including, sadly, some from Taunton Deane—are purchasing so-called quick-fix diet and detox products that are often endorsed by celebrities on social media, something for which these celebrities can be paid thousands of pounds. NHS chiefs say that some of these products can have highly detrimental health effects and are heaping work on our mental health services. In Eating Disorders Awareness Week, and following this morning’s excellent Westminster Hall debate secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair), will the Prime Minister agree that the irresponsible and unsafe endorsement of such products should be addressed?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. I am sure that all Members have had constituency cases where they have seen the devastating impact that eating disorders can have on individuals, and on their families and friends. The Government have been taking steps over the past few years. In 2014 we announced that we were investing £150 million to expand eating disorder community-based care for children and young people, and 70 dedicated new or extended community services offer care as a result. As my hon. Friend said, young people may be encouraged to take products because of celebrity endorsement. The celebrities involved should think very carefully about the impact that these products can have in effecting eating disorders, which devastate lives.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The Prime Minister, and indeed the entire House, know the conditions under which her withdrawal agreement will have a majority. The whole House, and indeed the country, now know that as a result of yesterday’s events the prospects of the Prime Minister being able to achieve the necessary changes have been undermined and her negotiating position has been weakened. That is the reality of the situation. Can we have an assurance, in terms of any possible extension—and I would be interested to know what the Prime Minister thinks the purpose of the extension would be—that she will continue to focus on getting those legally binding changes? Hopefully, during any future negotiations, she will not be undermined in the way that she has been so far.

The Prime Minister: First of all, we are continuing to press for those legally binding changes. Those are the discussions we have been having with the European Commission. It is what I have spoken to every European Union leader about over the last 10 days or so. It is what I was speaking to people about at Sharm El Sheikh over the weekend as well. The right hon. Gentleman talks about the extension to article 50. Can I be very clear again? The Government do not want to extend article 50. The Government’s policy is to get the legally binding changes so a deal can be brought back to this House, and this House can support the deal, and we can leave on 29 March with a deal.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Unlike some Ministers who cannot normally take the view that the Prime Minister’s word is binding, I do take the Prime Minister’s word as being binding. Can I ask that she reiterates our manifesto commitment to leave with a deal or to leave with no deal, and that is our commitment?

The Prime Minister: Indeed, I have always said that no deal is better than a bad deal. I think we have actually got a good deal from the European Union. It provides for citizens’ rights; it provides certainty for business with the implementation period; it ensures that we have, in the political declaration, the arrangements for customs in the future—for no tariffs, no quotas and no rules of origin; and it covers a number of other areas that I think will indeed be positive for this country. There is an issue that the House wants to see changed. That is what we are working on in relation to the Northern Ireland backstop. I want us to leave with a deal. I want to be able to bring back a deal that this House can support.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): Violet Grace Youens was walking home from nursery with her grandma on 24 March 2017. She was hit by a stolen car driven erratically and at 83 mph in a
30 mph zone. The driver and accomplice immediately left the scene, and the driver absconded from the country. Tragically, four-year-old Violet Grace died in her parents’ arms the following day and her grandma suffers with life-changing injuries. The offenders have since been sentenced to tariffs that do not fit the gravity of the crimes.

In October 2017, the Government published a response to the consultation on driving offences and penalties relating to causing death or serious injury. They confirmed proposals to increase the maximum penalty for causing death by dangerous driving from 14 years’ imprisonment to life, along with other tariffs for serious driving offences, and stated that Government would bring forward proposals for reform of the law as soon as parliamentary time allows. Today, after just one week, the public petition “Violet Grace’s Law” stands at more than 74,000 signatures. The Government are repeating the same response—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. This is a matter of the utmost sensitivity. I respect that, and that is why I am allowing the hon. Lady to go way beyond the normal length, but she must now put a question with a question mark—one sentence to wrap it up very well. Thank you.

**Ms Rimmer:** Prime Minister, when do the Government truly intend to bring forward the changes for the reform of the law?

**The Prime Minister:** First of all, I am sure that the feelings of the whole House will be with Violet Grace’s family that this terrible tragedy has occurred. I know from a constituency case that I had the concern that parents, family members and others have when they see somebody who has caused a death in this way by their driving being sentenced to a tariff which they feel is less than it should be. The Government have taken this very seriously—that is why we have had the consultation—and we will indeed bring forward our proposals when parliamentary time does allow. But I will ask a Minister from the Department for Transport to meet the hon. Lady to discuss this matter with her.

**Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con):** Mr Speaker, I do not know whether you were as surprised as I was yesterday that, yet again, the media had verbatim reports of the Cabinet meeting straight after it. In fact, there were references to colleagues in front of me as kamikaze pilots. Prime Minister, to sort this issue out, would it not just be easier to televise Cabinet meetings? [Laughter.]

**Mr Speaker:** I want to hear the Prime Minister’s answer. This is a very important question.

**The Prime Minister:** Mr Speaker, when you did a thumbs-up after that question, I was not sure whether that indicated that you had a view on the televising of Cabinet meetings. My hon. Friend has tried to approach that issue in various ways. I seem to remember that last time he asked me about this, it was not about televising Cabinet but sending his CV in to be a Cabinet Minister. Perhaps these are linked—perhaps he wants to sit round the Cabinet table and be on television all the time.

**Mr Speaker:** Well, we never knew that the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) had such ambitions, but maybe it lurks within him—who knows? For my own part, I was merely acknowledging welcome and friendly visitors to the House.
Jammu and Kashmir

12.47 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the security and humanitarian situation in Kashmir, in the light of the escalating tensions between India and Pakistan.

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I understand that the Prime Minister referred to this during Prime Minister’s Question Time. The UK is deeply concerned about rising tensions between India and Pakistan. Understandably, there has been huge interest in this rapidly developing situation. The House will understand that it would not be appropriate for me to comment in detail on reportage at this time, as the situation evolves.

We understand that on 14 February, at least 40 paramilitary Indian police officers were killed in a suicide attack in India-administered Kashmir. The Pakistan-based militant group Jaish-e-Mohammed claimed responsibility for that attack. India-Pakistan tensions, which were already at a high level, rose significantly following the attack, and both countries publicly exchanged heated rhetoric. On Tuesday 26 February, Indian and Pakistani news reported that Indian jets had crossed the line of control between India-administered and Pakistan-administered Kashmir. There have been reports of further ceasefire violations across the line of control overnight, and the situation remains unclear but fast developing.

The Foreign Secretary spoke to his Indian and Pakistani counterparts on Monday to discuss the situation, and we are in regular contact with both countries at senior levels to encourage restraint and to avoid escalating tensions further. We are monitoring developments closely and considering the implications for British nationals. I will be speaking to both the Indian and Pakistani high commissioners this afternoon and will continue to press for the importance of restraint. We urge both sides to engage in dialogue and find diplomatic solutions to ensure regional stability. We are working closely with international partners, including through the United Nations Security Council, to de-escalate tensions.

India and Pakistan are both long-standing and important friends of the United Kingdom. We have many and significant links to both countries through sizeable diaspora communities. As a consequence, we enjoy strong bilateral relations with both nations. The UK Government’s position on Kashmir remains that it is and must be for India and Pakistan to find a lasting political resolution to this situation, taking into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people. It is not for the UK to prescribe, intervene or interfere with a solution or to act as mediator.

I know that the House has previously raised concerns about the humanitarian and human rights situation in both India-administered Kashmir and Pakistan-administered Kashmir. We continue to monitor the situation, and we encourage all states to ensure that their domestic standards are in line with international standards.

Debbie Abrahams: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I am grateful to the Minister for his response, but this has been an ongoing situation since independence in 1947, and successive Governments have failed, in dealing with the issues associated with Kashmir, to help facilitate peace alongside our international allies.

As the Minister has said, he is aware of the recent aerial attacks from India and then from Pakistan, following on from the militant attack in the Pulwama district of Jammu and Kashmir and the death of the 40 Indian troops. This is a proscribed group in Pakistan. I understand that it is said to be apparently based there, but as I say, it has been proscribed by Pakistan. I am grateful to the Minister for reporting on the action he has already taken and the dialogue he has already had with counterparts in the high commissions for both India and Pakistan, and I would be grateful if he reported back once he has had meetings on this, because it is a very fast-moving situation.

The Minister mentioned the UN Security Council. What specific action has been decided on there? India has said that airstrikes in Balakot in north-western Pakistan yesterday were in response to the militants’ attack and killed a large number of militants, but Pakistan has said there were no casualties. Will the Minister clarify these reports? Today, Pakistan claims to have shot down two Indian jets when they entered Pakistani airspace, and the Indian news agency Asian News International has reported that a Pakistani jet has also been shot down on the Pakistan side of the line of control. Again, if the Minister could expand on some of this information, that would be very helpful.

In the light of the escalation in military action, will the Foreign Secretary be altering his travel advice to UK citizens? The Minister knows there is large Kashmiri diaspora in the UK, many of whom have families still based there, and their safety is a real concern for them. As I say, the escalating tensions have had a profound effect on our communities. What assurance can he give them that the UK Government are doing all they can not just to de-escalate tensions now, but to work towards a sustainable peace in the region?

Both India and Pakistan are nuclear powers. This is not just an issue for the region; it is an issue for the whole world. As the chair of the all-party group on Kashmir, I have repeatedly reiterated our commitment to supporting a process of peace and reconciliation in the region, but the UK Government need to step up and help to facilitate this, alongside our international partners. We have a vital role to play, as I say, not just in de-escalation, but in terms of a sustainable peace, and I urge the Minister to do all that he can to do this.

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Lady for her calm and wise words. May I say that I appreciate she has a busy day today already, with huge amounts going on near her own constituency following the large-scale fires? We are very grateful for her work, and we all recognise as Members of Parliament that we are sometimes torn between important international issues that are close to our hearts and dealing with those that may seem very parochial. None the less, I am very grateful for her words—her words of calm.

On the UN specifically, the hon. Lady is right that this is a UN issue of some urgency, simply because obviously both Pakistan and India are nuclear nations. It is therefore all the more important that we try to tone down some of the rhetoric and, dare I say it,
some of the actions we have seen in recent days. I think there are many friends of India and of Pakistan—and of Kashmir—not just here in the UK but across the world who are doing their best to try to calm this down.

The hon. Lady will I hope appreciate, in relation to the clarification she has requested on some of the reports—she made reference to reports of Indian planes having been shot down over the last 24 hours—that I do not want, and I hope she will understand why, to be drawn into comment on this because it is a fluid situation and many of these reports are unconfirmed. I therefore think that the most important thing, as I say, is to try to produce a slightly calmer approach.

On the issue of travel advice that the hon. Lady requested, we are very closely monitoring the situation, and we shall keep our travel advice under constant review and update it regularly—not just in Kashmir, but obviously in other countries. I should say to the hon. Lady that, as it happens, I am going to be in the region on a long-prearranged trip—provided we get out of this place, anyway, with Brexit votes later on. I am hoping to go to India tomorrow morning for three days. This is obviously a fast-moving issue, and I will speak not just on a long-prearranged trip—provided we get out of this place, anyway, with Brexit votes later on. I am hoping to go to India tomorrow morning for three days. This is obviously a fast-moving issue, and I will speak not just with our high commissioner out in New Delhi, but obviously with counterparts both there and in Mumbai.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) on securing this urgent question about this very tense situation, and I thank the Minister for his solid answers thus far. Clearly, the escalating tension emanates from the terrorist suicide attack by Jaish-e-Mohammed on 14 February. This group is based in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and in Pakistan, so clearly the answer to this is that Pakistan has to take action to dismantle the terrorist camps and organise so that the terrorists are brought to justice. Will my right hon. Friend tell the Pakistani high commission to own up to its responsibilities and make sure that the terrorists face justice?

Mark Field: I have a lot of respect for my hon. Friend, who takes a great interest in these issues. However, I think he is making some categorical statements that are not entirely supportable at this point. As I say, I think it is important for all of us as Members of Parliament with significant diasporas—I know that there is a predominantly Indian diaspora in his own Harrow East constituency—to try to calm feelings and to de-escalate some of the concerns, not least as this is a fast-moving situation.

It is fair to say, however, that Jaish-e-Mohammed has claimed responsibility for the 14 February attack. The UK will continue to support a listing of that organisation and indeed of its leader, Masood Azhar, under UN Security Council resolution 1267. The organisation itself has been listed by the UN since 2001, and Masood Azhar is the head of that organisation. However, I think it is very premature to start making categorical statements about any involvement by Pakistan in this issue. We will obviously keep this under review, and as I say, I will endeavour to speak with both the Indian and Pakistani high commissioners this afternoon to ask them for any updates on the situation.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for securing it, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) and for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), who I know also sought an urgent question today.

At the outset, let me make it quite clear that we condemn the despicable terror attack carried out in Pulwama on 14 February, and I believe that we speak on behalf of the whole House when we do so. India has been absolutely right to take action against the terrorist group responsible and to urge Pakistan to follow suit. It is also high time that China lifted its veto so that the UN can designate the head of JeM as a global terrorist.

Will the Minister join me in urging the Indian authorities, at national and regional level, to protect those innocent civilians of Kashmiri origin who have faced reprisals across India following the Pulwama attack? On the airstrikes and dogfights of the last two days, will the Minister of State join me in calling for immediate talks between India and Pakistan to de-escalate that crisis, but also in urging them to put an immediate stop to any military activity that risks escalating it further? We have heard both sides claim that their actions have simply been designed to send a message, but it is all too easy in those situations for messages to be misinterpreted and for grave and fatal mistakes to be made.

Finally, will the Minister of State join me in asking both India and Pakistan to think first and foremost of the innocent people of Kashmir, who are literally caught in the middle of this crossfire and have been so for 70 years? Their human rights have been serially abused, their humanitarian needs have been neglected, and their own wishes about their own future have been treated as unimportant. No one in India, Pakistan or this country wants yet another generation of Kashmiri children growing up facing the same cycle of instability, violence and fear that has afflicted their parents and grandparents for decades. Only peaceful dialogue can break that cycle. All parties must commit to engaging in that dialogue.

Mark Field: The right hon. Lady is absolutely right that we want a broad-based dialogue, and that the whole House condemned the original attack that took place on 14 February. I have to say that the concern about China’s veto is unfortunately not isolated to issues around Kashmir. There are other areas, not least in relation to the Rohingya population from Burma, on which, as she knows, the prospect of a veto and of a lack of co-operation does not make life easy within the UN Security Council. There are other organisations, such as the European Union and the UN Human Rights Council, through which we will try to utilise as much muscle as we can, again in collaboration in with other countries, to try to bring about the peaceable progress to which she refers.

The right hon. Lady also raised the humanitarian situation. We recognise that there are and have been long-standing human rights concerns in both Indian-administered and Pakistani-administered Kashmir. We believe that any allegation of human rights abuses is of great concern and has to be investigated thoroughly, promptly and transparently. I reassure the House, as I
I thank the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth Members on both sides of the House. Kashmiri population. I know that that applies to many amount of work on this, not least because one of the note, I am well aware that my hon. Friend does a huge at it—to the Whips Office, Mr Speaker. On a serious elevated—or maybe demoted; whichever way one looks that you look forward for that reason to the day I am is the fate of Government Whips that they do not have a Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), it nuclear powers in that part of the world, and that it is this is an extremely serious situation involving two and Geneva. I should perhaps say that this goes beyond take place within the UN corridors of both New York to Kashmir are able to support their families and those quiet corridors, so that when they get to the actual talks, get together and talk, at least in the margins and the other members of the Security Council and encourage those who are friends of both countries to help them to get together and talk, at least in the margins and the quiet corridors, so that when they get to the actual talks, there is a conversation to be had? Will he also ensure that those members of the UK population with connections to Kashmir are able to support their families and those who may have been cut off or in any way harmed by the economic shocks affecting the region at the moment? I understand that my right hon. Friend will not play a part as a negotiator or mediator, but will he at least do his best to get around the UN General Assembly and other members of the Security Council and encourage those who are friends of both countries to help them to get together and talk, at least in the margins and the quiet corridors, so that when they get to the actual talks, there is a conversation to be had? Will he also ensure that those members of the UK population with connections to Kashmir are able to support their families and those who may have been cut off or in any way harmed by the economic shocks affecting the region at the moment? We will do our level best as this situation evolves and we are able to say more, and with more certainty, to ensure that the House is kept fully informed.

Mark Field: We shall do our level best. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that active congregations will take place within the UN corridors of both New York and Geneva. I should perhaps say that this goes beyond simply friends of Pakistan and India. The realisation is that this is an extremely serious situation involving two nuclear powers in that part of the world, and that it is therefore in everyone's interest to see a de-escalation, but with an eye towards trying to solve some of the underlying problems for the longer-term future.

Unfortunately for the man to my right, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), it is the fate of Government Whips that they do not have a chance to say very much—[Interruption.] I am sure that you look forward for that reason to the day I am elevated—or maybe demoted; whichever way one looks at it—to the Whips Office, Mr Speaker. On a serious note, I am well aware that my hon. Friend does a huge amount of work on this, not least because one of the main towns in his constituency, Nelson, has a significant Kashmiri population. I know that that applies to many Members on both sides of the House.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for raising this important urgent question. I also thank the Minister for his measured response to the situation to date. However, the House will be concerned about the rise in conflict in that region, especially when the nations involved have access to nuclear weapons. Will the Minister ensure that the serious concerns raised in the House are relayed directly to the Governments of Pakistan and India at the highest level, and that the Foreign Office strains every sinew to make sure that both parties act with responsibility and restraint, and that it insists that escalation is not an option?

Many Members have mentioned positive and meaningful talks taking place. In order to protect the civilian populations on both sides of the border, and indeed within Kashmir, we need to ensure that these populations are not put at any further risk. I know that the Government are focused on other matters at the moment, but I hope that the Minister, or the Foreign Secretary, will be able to keep us up to date with developments on a regular basis.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) just entered the Chamber carrying, as per usual, a book. I note in passing something of which the right hon. Gentleman will be well aware. In his party, which used to be my party, it was frequently said that to be seen carrying a book was dangerous, but to be seen reading it was fatal.

Mr Keith Simpson (Broadland) (Con): I do both. [Laughter.]

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I absolutely condemn the perpetrators of the initial act of violence, but I also condemn airstrikes in retaliation for what really could have been a crime, rather than an act of war. Thousands of my constituents will be alarmed about the prospect of escalation because they have families on not only one but both sides of the line of control. Will the Minister join me in saying to the evil people who perpetrate acts of violence for political causes that they defeat their own ends by the revulsion and horror that they cause?

Mark Field: I know full well that my hon. Friend has a significant Kashmiri population in his constituency, not least because I have had the chance to meet some of them in recent weeks. He is absolutely right: it is entirely self-defeating. In many ways, we all want to see some sort of normalcy within the Kashmir area, whether under Pakistani or Indian administration. Above all, the clearest way for that to happen is if there is stability in that region, which would allow for economic prosperity. One only has to look close at hand to our situation in Northern Ireland. It was when the worst of the troubles
of the 1970s and ‘80s were behind us that we were able to see some progress and international investors could comfortable about being able to build businesses in that country. That is the great prize if we can de-escalate some of these long-standing issues within Kashmir.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): Until his election, Prime Minister Modi was banned from entering the United Kingdom for his part in the Gujarat massacre, which resulted in more than 2,000 Muslim deaths. As Prime Minister, he has pursued a divisive, right-wing, Hindu nationalist agenda that has inflamed tensions in both India and occupied Jammu and Kashmir. Instead of pointing fingers at Pakistan for the Pulwama attack, when will Prime Minister Modi look at his own record of persistent state violence and gross human right abuses, as highlighted by both the UN and all-party parliamentary Kashmir group reports, which caused the rise of the home-grown insurgency in Kashmir?

Mark Field: I understand the hon. Lady’s heartfelt passion, but let me just say this: that is not relevant to the present situation. We all know we are in a pre-election period in India, and that is one of the factors of concern. We want to see a de-escalation at the earliest possible opportunity to avoid the sorts of issues to which she refers. She will appreciate that from the perspective of the Foreign Office we want to remain strong friends on all sides. To start condemning, in the way she proposes, would only undermine our position of trying to bring both sides together.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): May I ask that the Government recognise the severity of the terrorist threat faced by India in relation to Kashmir, and that our Government offer support where the Indian Government take measures they feel are necessary to protect the security of their citizens?

Mark Field: We will offer support to all Governments who look to protect their civilian populations, but we will do so in a way that is managed, manageable and not focused on an overreaction to what has happened. I appreciate that, as my right hon. Friend rightly says, the attack on 14 February was one of the very worst single episodes for some decades, but equally we would like to see restraint on both sides, recognising the importance of having a secure region to ensure that civilian populations are properly protected.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Just last week, I returned from leading a delegation of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association to Pakistan, during which I met the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister assured the delegation of his commitment, reiterating that he wants a peaceful resolution through diplomacy. I am sure the Minister is aware that the central issue in this crisis is Kashmir. While the people of Kashmir are not given their right to self-determination they will not be free, nor can we truly expect to see long-term peace between India and Pakistan. Does the Minister agree that now is the time to change our policy position on Kashmir and play a central role in helping to resolve the issue that we played a part in creating when leaving the region as a colonial power? Will he consider making an application to the United Nations Security Council on this matter?

Mark Field: I must say—the hon. Lady will recognise this—that I do not agree with her prescription that we should try to intervene. The reality of the situation, as I am sure she is well aware, is that if the UK Government were to offer to mediate or feel that it is our place to interfere, we would simply lose credibility, particularly with the Indian Government. We would therefore end up not being able to play the role we do in trying to ensure a de-escalation of tensions. Our long-standing position is, and must continue to be, for India and Pakistan to find a political resolution to the situation in Kashmir through their own efforts, taking into account the wishes, as she rightly says, of Kashmiri people. If we were to intervene, interfere, prescribe a solution or purport that we can somehow be a mediator, I think that would very much undermine our position on all sides.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I was going to call the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), but he now seems very pre-occupied with—[Interruption.] We have already heard the fella. I should not have forgotten so quickly. I will remind myself of the eloquence of his contribution in due course.

Mr Shaiiles Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): The Minister is taking a very fine line, trying to sit on the fence, effectively, mindful that there are diasporas from both Pakistan and India living in this country. He is treading a very fine line in his answers. However, where it is abundantly clear that the terrorists are living in one particular country, will he give an undertaking to this House that the British Government will make it absolutely clear to that host country that it should not be tolerating terrorists who are engaging in activity in another country and that they must face the full force of law?

Mark Field: My hon. Friend will recognise that, as a diplomat or a Foreign Office Minister, sometimes the most effective way to make an argument to our counterparts is not through megaphone diplomacy. There are robust private conversations that will take place. I do not want to go into detail as to what they will say, but let me just say this. We do understand that there is a need and a desire for any country to act proportionately to secure its borders, people and military, but the idea that the UK should be seen to be robustly on one side of this battle rather than another would be entirely self-defeating. I think it is in the interests of us all to take a calm approach. Of course, we will not in any way do anything other than criticise terrorist organisations. That is one reason why the organisation Jaish-e-Mohammed has been subject to a UN listing for almost 20 years and has been proscribed in the UK for that period of time.

Mr Speaker: My profuse apologies to the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), on whose every word, as he knows, I ordinarily hang. My attention was momentarily distracted, and I apologise to him.

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): I must express my grave concern and alarm at the ongoing escalation of the conflict between India and Pakistan in disputed Kashmir. War will benefit no one, least of all the people of Kashmir. As of yet, however, there are no signs of a
serious—I emphasise that word—international attempt to put an end to this crisis. Does the Minister agree that the international community must do more and act now to rights concerns are the root cause of military violence? If so, what steps will his Government be taking to achieve that outcome?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman. As I mentioned earlier, we are working as rapidly as we can within all international organisations. If I may touch on a point I did not address earlier about the UN, we are working within the UN. This is a major issue, not least because of the fact that these are two nuclear powers. I suspect there will be a move to de-escalate and negotiate as far as possible. I know from discussions with our US counterparts that they are also expressing concerns. Ultimately, I believe it must be for the Kashmiri people to find a way forward. I appreciate that there is a lot of history. The worry is that a lot of things can be said and done now that could be very difficult to forget. The prize for the future is to try to achieve a more peaceable solution. Ultimately, that must come from the hearts of those who are in Kashmir, whether of Pakistani or Indian origin.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), I have many thousands of constituents who are very worried about family members in Kashmir. I was heartened by what the Minister of State had to say about his robust conversations on human rights with both sides. Does he agree that there is perhaps more we can do as a nation to help investigate human rights abuses and ensure that truth is brought to the forefront, rather than the great deal of misinformation we are hearing at the moment?

Mark Field: Yes, I very much agree with my hon. Friend. She will be aware that any allegations of human rights abuses are concerning and need to be investigated thoroughly, promptly and transparently. She will also be aware that our single biggest Department for International Development budget is in Pakistan. Human rights abuses are a part and parcel of the money that is spent out there, trying to build up capacity and capability to ensure that such human rights issues are properly dealt with.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The whole House will support the Government and the United Nations in their efforts to get India and Pakistan to draw back from further conflict, but does the Minister agree that it is the people of Kashmir who are both the victims and spectators of their own future because of the failure of those two countries to reach an agreement on what will happen? Above all else, the people of Kashmir want the chance to live in peace and security, and to have the right to determine their own future, as they were promised over 70 years ago when it was suggested that a referendum might be held. That, of course, has never taken place.

Mark Field: I am not sure I would recommend a referendum to anyone in the current circumstances—certainly, it would not be wise for the UK—but the right hon. Gentleman makes a very serious, fair point. We continue to raise human rights issues and to look at this in a humanitarian sense. To add my responses to one or two other contributions, we noted the findings of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights reports and are particularly concerned about allegations of human rights abuses and violations in both India and Pakistan-administered Kashmir. I make it clear that we will continue to raise these issues with the Government in New Delhi.

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests; as the former chairman of the all-party Kashmir group, I visited the region. Many thousands of constituents are concerned for family, friends and loved ones in the region and have contacted me to raise their concerns. Does the Minister agree that this situation is worrying on two levels—first, because we have two nuclear powers squaring off against each other, and secondly, because the people on the ground in Kashmir are the ones who are suffering? Given that we have heard about the documented evidence of human rights abuses, does he not agree that the right course of action might be for us to send observers, perhaps with our EU colleagues, to make sure that there are no human rights abuses on the ground in Kashmir?

Mark Field: I know that my hon. Friend is also a former officer of the all-party beer group—I wondered whether he was going to express that interest today. Again, he makes a serious point about having observers, whether at an EU or UN level. We will do our level best, particularly as this situation develops, to ensure that the international community has a chance to see what is going on on the ground in order to de-escalate the tensions.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the answer that the Minister has just given, he set out his fears of somehow being seen to take sides. Let me tell him that the community in Walthamstow, who are desperately concerned about the situation in Kashmir, want him to stay on the side of human rights. He spoke about the importance of the work that the UN can do in investigating these cases. He has also told us that he is going to have phone calls this afternoon with the Pakistani and Indian representatives. Will he commit now to raising directly the importance of them allowing the UN to go to the region and investigate, so that finally, when we talk about allegations, we can show the truth and the people of Kashmir can have justice?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and I will be only too happy to commit to making that pledge, as it were, in the telephone calls that I will have later this afternoon. I talk about not taking sides, but in the days to come, to ensure that the voice that she said, I will commit in my conversations not just today, but in the days to come, to ensure that the voice that she
Mark Field: I am amazed I am so popular—it is great to see. I will ensure that that voice is properly heard.

Mr Speaker: Opposition Members’ concern, I say to the Minister, is for the knee muscles of Government Back Benchers buoying up and down in eager expectation of their opportunity to be called.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Apart from being the chair of the all-party group on Pakistan, I was born in Kashmir, and in the 2005 earthquake, I lost 25 relatives, including my grandfather. Muzaffarabad is very near the line of control. The people of Kashmir want peace, prosperity, human dignity and to be masters of their own destiny. As the Minister says, our long-standing position is in line with the 1948 United Nations resolutions 47 and 39, which the United Kingdom signed up to, saying that we will support the people of Kashmir’s right to self-determination. That being the case, will the Minister please push for that at the United Nations and, as other colleagues have said, for a United Nations human rights fact-finding mission? Whatever it says and whoever it finds against—the Indian or Pakistani sides—we will all accept it.

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. As I said, we note the findings of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights reports, which are deeply concerning. We will make sure that these are brought up in international committee, both in New York and in Geneva.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Ind): The attack in Srinagar was absolutely atrocious, and the prospect of descending into a tit-for-tat exchange is immensely depressing. As the Minister knows, this is an incredibly serious issue. I speak as the former chair of the all-party Kashmir group. Last year, we published our report on our inquiry into the human rights situation, as the Minister knows, because he heard a recent presentation on that. I hear what he says about Government policy, but we have a responsibility to help to support confidence-building measures. We have a legacy responsibility in that region of the world, and the UK has an obligation to lead and show the way forward for human rights and peace in this area.

Mark Field: I take on board what the hon. Gentleman says and support the idea that there is a leadership role, not least within the UN Security Council, where clearly, long-standing connections between the UK and both India and Pakistan will be brought to bear. We will continue to be in the closest possible contact at senior level in both India and Pakistan to try to avoid escalation and ensure regional stability. Part of that is obviously about the capacity building to which he refers. I think he will understand that quite a lot of work goes on both in India and Pakistan to try to ensure that this is brought to bear and hopefully make lives better for all concerned.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): My right hon. Friend referred to the discussions and channels that are being used through diplomatic routes both with the UN and directly, and it is very fortuitous that he happens to be visiting the region in the next few days. Before he goes, will he also engage with the Ministry of Defence to encourage senior military leaders and Ministers to engage with their counterparts both in India and Pakistan to make sure that there are senior-level military-to-military back channels between the two armed forces, so that they can help to avoid the accidental escalation of conflict?

Mark Field: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments. He, of course, was a Defence Minister and will understand that those back channels exist. Clearly they are not always entirely avowed, but the UK has back-channels with both the Indian military and the Pakistani military, and I am well aware that conversations have already taken place and will no doubt continue at pace.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): This is the latest chapter in a horrendous story for the people of Kashmir, as I am sure the whole House agrees. What efforts is the Minister making to ensure that day-to-day communication with the diaspora community is ongoing so that they know what is happening to their friends and family in Kashmir?

Mark Field: I very much understand the hon. Lady’s concerns. The picture is very confused at the moment, and I wish we could confirm more what is happening on the ground. Part of the reason that I have not been able to be as expansive as I would like is simply that there are conflicting reports of what is happening. Obviously, we will do our level best to ensure that as many of the diaspora, who must be increasingly worried about the wellbeing of their relatives close at hand, are kept as informed as possible in the circumstances. When I am in the region, I will make sure that we express that.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for securing this urgent question. Like many hon. Members, I have a significant community of Kashmiris in my constituency, who are extremely concerned. I am also the senior vice-chair of the all-party Kashmir group. Does the Minister agree that we must condemn the use of violence and the abuse of human rights wherever it occurs and by all parties in Kashmir?

Mark Field: I agree entirely. We do, and will continue to do so.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Those of us of south Asian ancestry were overjoyed recently at the opening of the Indo-Pak border—an historic and commendable decision by both Governments—so that Sikhs and others could pay homage at the final resting place of the founder of the Sikh faith. We had hoped that there would be further border openings, but simultaneously we expressed concern that terrorist attacks or abuse of human rights would once again sow the seeds of hatred and division. Does the Minister agree that we need to impress upon both nations the need to urgently de-escalate tensions, and that we need to work with them to find lasting, sustainable peace for the long-suffering but wonderful Kashmiri people?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who always speaks with such calmness about such matters. I have had strong dealings with him on a number of issues, at
both ministerial and constituency levels. I entirely endorse what he said. I think we all want to see a regularisation of the situation, with as much access as possible for those who are currently living in India, or currently in Pakistan to be able to go to homelands that their forefathers lived in.

**Zac Goldsmith** (Richmond Park) (Con): I declare an interest as a friend, admirer and former relative of the new Prime Minister of Pakistan. Does my right hon. Friend share my view that everything we have seen so far from the new Prime Minister demonstrates an absolute commitment to tackling extremism and terrorism? Does he agree with the new Prime Minister’s words, shortly after he was elected, that the surest route to peace between India and Pakistan in the long term is to increase and expand the trade movements between the two countries?

**Mark Field**: I could not agree more. I had a chance to meet Imran Khan, at a time when he was regarded as a potential kingmaker, when I visited KP—Khyber Pakhtunkhwa—the region where his party was the strongest, back in 2017. Obviously, he has arrived at a pivotal time in India-Pakistan relations, with an imminent Indian election, and with all the financial issues concerning Pakistan, which have inevitably taken up quite a lot of his time in his first few months as Prime Minister. Yes, his rhetoric has always been in favour of peace, but he has also shown recognition that having the broadest range of friends across the world is the surest way of seeing prosperity and normalcy in all parts of Pakistan.

**Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): Perhaps there is a point on which we can have agreement across the House while, as we sit here today, the drums of war beat once more between two nuclear powers. Surely we must now, in this House, realise our ethical, moral and historical duty to help to provide peace and stability in that region. The central issue, as hon. Members have said, is Kashmir; and the voice that has gone unheard for over 70 years is that of the sons and daughters of Kashmir, who, in the face of oppression, violence and persecution, continue to look towards this House for justice. So, Minister, now is the time to move away from gesture politics and towards finding a concrete resolution, fulfilling our international obligations to actively support the birthright of the sons and daughters of Kashmir, which is self-determination.

**Mr Speaker**: Order. Could I just very gently say, and I say it in a convivial spirit to the hon. Gentleman, that the erudition of his inquiry was equalled only by its length, and that has been emblematic of the exchanges on this urgent question—nodding assent to which is provided by the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne). It would be a pity if we took an hour on an urgent question with only about 30 quizzers, because that really should not happen.

**Mark Field**: I think he is suggesting that I am at least 50% to blame for that as well.

I respect deeply the passion of the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain). I hope he does not feel that gesture politics is involved here. We shall do our level best to bring parties together. While I have always said that there is a set policy that we will not have an official mediation, please be assured that we are doing our level best to bring people together. The one message I would give to the hon. Gentleman is that we need to try to de-escalate and calm some of the passions that we shall see within our own country in the weeks and months ahead. It is in the interests not just of all Kashmiris, but of stability within the UK as well.

**Mr Marcus Jones** (Nuneaton) (Con): Over decades, people have been subjected to violence, oppression and human rights abuses in Kashmir. The events of recent weeks will only compound the challenges and divide people more, rather than bringing a solution in Kashmir. Will my right hon. Friend and the Government do all that they can to use UK influence to bring dialogue between India and Pakistan, to try to prevent the escalation of these issues and the terrorism that is going on, so that we can start again to focus more on dealing with the issue of how Kashmir determines itself?

**Mark Field**: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. He is aware that we are trying to do our level best, precisely along the lines that he has suggested. May I just say this to the House? Interestingly, when I speak to many of my Indian, and indeed Pakistani, constituents, they often marvel at the fact that, on my very first visit to India back in 2003, I had the chance to go to both Srinagar and Jammu. The tragedy, in many ways, is that it is a beautiful part of the world and would offer tremendous opportunities not just for tourism; it would be an amazing place for many, many people with Kashmir in their hearts to visit. That is the great prize—to ensure that things are normalised. We know that a painstaking diplomatic approach will be required to bring about that normalisation, so that the beauty of that part of the world may become obvious to many, many people.

**Julie Cooper** (Burnley) (Lab): The Minister’s focus on the human rights of the people of Kashmir is genuinely welcome, but the fact remains that the humanitarian crisis has been raging in Kashmir for decades, largely ignored by this country and the rest of the world. Hon. Members throughout the House, from all parties, have repeatedly asked for us to take a leading role and to bring diplomatic peace talks to the forefront. Does he agree that it is a terrible shame that it takes an escalation of violence between two nuclear powers to achieve what, hopefully, will be a wake-up call for the British Government?

**Mark Field**: I am sorry that the hon. Lady thinks this is a wake-up call. This is something that is close to all our hearts, not least because there are significant numbers of diaspora and their many Members of Parliament raise these issues, whether in parliamentary questions or in urgent questions such as today’s, and indeed with the all-party parliamentary group, which I know she attended only a few weeks ago.

Let us be candid. What is particularly serious here, as one or two hon. Members have said, is that we are now dealing with two nuclear powers. The issues of Kashmir were not in a nuclear-to-nuclear state until Pakistan acquired nuclear capability, 25 to 30 years ago. That is why the matter is of particular seriousness. That is not to say that a huge amount of work has not been going
on behind the scenes for many years. Obviously, it becomes a lot more high-profile with all that is happening now.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I know that the Minister will not want to comment on the claim and counterclaim around aircraft being shot down and around the specifics of pilots having been captured, but would he perhaps agree that the chances of a calm dialogue between the parties will be much increased if treatment of each other’s personnel is seen to be humane?

Mark Field: I entirely agree. I cannot speculate other than on reports that have come through and I will not go into any great detail on those, but I very much hope that, if there are military captured on either or both sides, they will be dealt with and treated within the Geneva convention and in a humane way.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I do not think any fair-minded person would expect the Government to take the side of Pakistan or India, but we are absolutely expecting the Government to step up and give a voice to the people in Kashmir. In the pursuit of power by aggression, it is always everyday people who pay the ultimate price, and too many people have had their lives on hold for generations. This matters to people in Oldham West and Royton, with a large heritage in that country; when this happens, it happens to their parents, their sons, their daughters, their brothers and sisters. They are just reaching out to the UK Government to say, “Give us a hand. Bring people together, convene and use that role in a positive way.”

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. We will do all that we can, along the lines that I have suggested. This is a very fluid situation, and obviously the most important thing is to de-escalate the tensions because they are at a very worrying level. He is right to point out, however, that there are underlying issues that also need to be dealt with.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): We have all been appalled by this terrorist attack. As has been said, communities like ours across the country are deeply concerned. Many of my constituents have families and friends in the region, and a member of my staff is currently trying to get there to attend a family wedding. Does the Minister agree that any reprisals against entirely innocent Kashmiri civilians elsewhere in India must stop, and will he make it clear to his Indian counterparts that, while we understand their anger, they must ensure that innocent people are not harmed when responding to this horrific attack?

Mark Field: I shall be happy to express those direct concerns when I speak to the Indian high commissioner later today.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): May I echo the comments of colleagues? Because of our history in the region, and because of our influence and close relationships with both India and Pakistan, Kashmiri families in my constituency look to the United Kingdom to take a leading role both in the immediate and dangerous conflict that we see before us now, and in bringing long-term peace, justice and freedom to Kashmir.

Mark Field: I am sorry, but as the hon. Lady will appreciate, we are just covering the same old ground. I well understand that each and every Member here wants to have his or her say for a range of reasons—often because of the diaspora, but often as well because they feel passionate about the relations between India and Pakistan. I suspect that there is little new that I can add, but I thank her for her words.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): We all condemn all forms of terrorism, and I think we all understand that war is not an option. Many of us have raised this matter multiple times in the House, but have received the same response from the Government time and again. This is an issue between India and Pakistan, but recent events reveal that it is not just an issue between those countries: it desperately requires international attention. The British Government need to facilitate talks and to play a greater role in de-escalating the dangerous level of tension between the two countries. I should like them to do more at a human level to ensure that there is an international investigation of what has happened, and to move towards the core issue, which is the issue of Kashmir.

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman always adopts a measured tone, which I think is important for all our constituents. He should be assured that a great deal of work has already been done by the United Nations in the last fortnight since the latest phase of escalation. Obviously, the events of the last couple of days have been a great worry and there is concern about what may come to pass, but a huge amount of work is going on behind the scenes diplomatically. The UK has an important, although by no means exclusive, part to play at the United Nations, and we shall continue to bring that to bear.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My constituent Madni Ahmed Tahir is one of my many constituents with Kashmiri roots, and has family in Kashmir. Can the Minister explain in a bit more detail what travel advice will be offered to my constituents, and what consideration his colleagues in the Home Office will give to visa applications that are currently in progress?

Mark Field: As the hon. Lady will recognise, those applications are a matter directly for the Home Office, but there will clearly be liaison between the two Departments. We are closely monitoring the situation relating to travel advice, on an hour-by-hour basis, as we become aware of confirmation of what is happening on the ground. We will keep that advice under constant review, and will update it on the website regularly.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Let me say, at the risk of repeating what has been said by other Members, that we constantly hear of human rights violations in occupied Kashmir, and we cannot be bystanders. What efforts is the Minister making to ensure that a thorough, transparent inquiry into these crimes is commissioned?

Mark Field: The hon. Lady will be aware that the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights produced a report recently. She will forgive me if I do not try to say any more now on the Floor of the House. I will try to write to her, if I may,
providing a list of the actions that have been taken over the past 12 months and an account of what we propose to do in the months to come.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): I must say that I am very disappointed with the Minister’s response so far. His Government are failing to take the necessary responsibility. This issue is far more serious than he and the Government are suggesting. Tensions are high, and two nuclear countries are on the verge of another conflict. Kashmiris have been dying since 1947. Will the Government take some real action and show some responsibility? Will they put both India and Pakistan at the table, so that they can resolve their issues through dialogue?

Mark Field: I refer the hon. Gentleman to my earlier answers on this matter. Successive Governments have clearly tried to work on it on a bilateral basis, which I think has been more helpful. A huge amount of work goes on. Our high commissions in both New Delhi and Islamabad, and other staff, work closely together in trying to do what can be done on the ground in Kashmir but, as I said at the outset, it is not our role to bring both parties to the table in the way that the hon. Gentleman suggests, and I think that trying to do so would be entirely counterproductive.

Mr Speaker: Eloquence and brevity combined? Mike Gapes.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Ind): While we should not exaggerate the influence that the British Government could have at this time, is it not nevertheless important for us, as a nuclear-weapon state, to do what Jack Straw did in 1999 during the Kargil crisis, when the role of the British Foreign Office was central to ensuring that it did not escalate into an all-out nuclear war?

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman is right: the issue of being a nuclear state makes the situation particularly serious at the moment, and it is one of the reasons why I think the international community will want to have a part to play. He clearly has some knowledge of and interest in the foreign affairs of 20 years ago, and if he feels that there are important lessons to be learnt from what happened at that time that we could bring to bear on this crisis, I should be happy to speak to him about them.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I declare my interest as the recently appointed co-chair of Labour Friends of India.

The Minister has spoken today about the direct involvement of the Government with embassies and through the United Nations Security Council, but what work should the Commonwealth be doing to bring about stability in the region?

Mark Field: I think that one of the most important things the Commonwealth can do—I am sure its Secretary General will have it very much in her mind—is bring people together and keep lines of communication open. The hon. Gentleman will be well aware that leading figures in the Commonwealth, in both India and Pakistan, have a political or an NGO-related background. We want to have as much dialogue as is possible in these very trying circumstances.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his deep interest in this matter. As chair of the all-party group for the Pakistani minorities, I visited Pakistan in September last year as part of a cross-party delegation to inquire into human rights and the persecution of Christians and religious minorities. We met the regional president of the Pakistan-Kashmir province, who made us aware of attacks on and killings of Pakistan Kashmiris, including the sexual abuse and rape of women. The president told us that the United Nations had a key role to play. What discussions has the Minister had with the UN to bring about a peace process?

Mark Field: Discussions about the current issue have taken place at the UN with our head of mission. If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, rather than giving a glib and quick answer here, I will write to him in detail about precisely what has happened in recent months.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Members of the Kashmir diaspora make an extraordinary contribution across our communities, nowhere more so than in Nottingham. They will understand, as I do, the Minister’s reluctance to pick a side, as he puts it, but will he be absolutely clear with the House and make a solemn commitment that when it comes to working through international organisations—especially the UN—when it comes to human rights and when it comes to humanitarian aid, the British Government will not be found wanting?

Mark Field: I hope the hon. Gentleman will feel reassured that that is very much the British Government’s approach. It is important that we work together on this, not just in the context of the urgent question but in the context of APPGs. I hope that we can work across Parliament, because we will have an even stronger voice if we speak as one. There will of course be disagreements at the margins, but if we can speak as one for Kashmiri and Kashmiri people, our voice will be all the more effective in dealing with our Indian and Pakistani counterparts.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I heard what the Minister said about not wishing to be seen to take a side and that he does not believe it is the UK’s role to bring together the Indian and Pakistan sides to form a compromise, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) pointed out, what the Kashmiri community both here and in Kashmir are looking for is a friend and ally who will speak up for them in the international forums, so may I ask the Minister what specific actions he will take inside the UN to make sure it fulfils its responsibility to speak up for that minority community?

Mark Field: I would not wish the hon. Gentleman to misunderstand the situation: we are a friend for all Kashmiris, and we are a friend of that region and indeed a strong friend for India and Pakistan internationally on this and related issues. It is a fluid situation and therefore I cannot go into specifics regarding the UN other than to say that feverish conversations are taking
place there, albeit while trying to instil a sense of calm. I am sure this matter will be formally dealt with at the UN General Assembly, as well as at the Security Council in the days to come.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The prime minister of Kashmir was in Glasgow last weekend discussing with a cross-party group of political representatives there the situation in Kashmir. The prime minister of Kashmir is in London today—he cannot return home because of closed airspace. Will the Minister meet him today—he will be in Parliament from 4 o’clock onwards, I understand—to hear directly from the direct representative of the Kashmiri people?

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman refers to the prime minister of Kashmir. The Foreign Office deals only with those whom we formally recognise. I am not sure of all the facts of this situation, but if he is not an individual we formally recognise, this is not a matter that I can pursue. No doubt, the hon. Gentleman will fill me in on the details in due course. I already have phone calls lined up with the high commissioners for Pakistan and for India during the course of this afternoon and will have other conversations as well.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): There have been worrying reports emerging in the last few minutes that the Indian and Pakistani armies are now engaged in heavy artillery exchanges at several locations on the line of control in western Kashmir, so the situation appears to be escalating rapidly. The Minister has undertaken to communicate with both sides in the conflict and understand the situation; will he commit to the FCO updating this House within the next 24 hours on the latest position and the actions the FCO will be taking to de-escalate it, in particular addressing the UN Security Council on this issue?

Mark Field: We have the mechanism of urgent questions to deal with such matters, and if there is an update we will want to make the House aware of it at the earliest possible opportunity. I hope to be in the region in the next 24 hours, so that might not be done in quite the timeframe the hon. Gentleman has in mind, but we will do our best once facts are established to inform the House of what is going on.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Because of the conflict global markets are now trading lower, with Asian investors seeking sanctuary in either the yen or the Swiss franc. Can the Minister give UK investors assurances about their investments within the region? I do not have a huge Indian or Pakistani diaspora, but one UK-born citizen from Dumbarton, Jagtar Singh Johal, is in an Indian jail, held arbitrarily without trial for over 500 days by the Indian republic. Through the fog of impending war, can the Minister, to whom I am grateful for going to India, remind the Indian state of its duty to uphold the rule of international law in border affairs and in human rights for UK nationals in its jails?

Mark Field: The Johal case has been raised on the Floor of the House, and as the hon. Gentleman is well aware, we have met on two or three occasions in the Foreign Office on this matter. I pledge to bring it up in my discussions in New Delhi that I hope to undertake on Friday.

It would be unwise to say anything about the international markets. Suffice it to say that I very much hope that businesses, particularly those where the diaspora is engaged in Kashmir and the region, will feel confident in the longer term that they are doing the right thing by engaging as fully as they are.

This urgent question has taken a long time—well over an hour—and I am struck by how passionate many Members are about this issue, and not just those with significant diaspora communities. This is obviously a fast-moving, fluid situation and I am sure we will come back to the House at some point to discuss it further. The one big message for all of us is to do all we can in our communities to de-escalate and calm the understandable passions that have been raised.
Planning (Affordable Housing and Land Compensation)

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

1.55 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to define affordable housing in relation to household incomes; to amend the law relating to land valuation and compensation; and for connected purposes.

Our post-war planning system is a framework for managing change in our towns and cities and ensuring that new development meets the needs of local communities, for brokering and mitigating the gap between individual private interests and collective community needs, and for redistributing the scarce resource of land. Local plans safeguard land for particular purposes, including housing, employment, education, and community uses. Our heritage protection regime and national parks protect the buildings and landscapes that communities value. Planning policies seek to ensure that affordable housing is delivered and that across many dimensions of design, from building height to energy performance standards, new buildings take due account of their surrounding community and wider environment. Despite that, our planning system, deregulated and modified in recent years, too often fails to deliver against either the promises it makes or the real and pressing needs of local communities.

In a wider political environment characterised by a lack of trust in politics, our planning system is part of the problem. Every time a new housing scheme is delivered in which even the “affordable” homes are far out of reach of local people in housing need, every time a new building starts to look shabby after just a short time and every time planning permission is granted but nothing happens on the site for years, trust is eroded a little more. It is time to restore a vision of planning as the key to meeting the needs of local communities while also safeguarding their interests for future generations, and it is time for planning to step up and play its full part in helping to restore trust in democratic processes.

We need an agenda for reform, and I want to set out today two reforms—of the definition of affordable housing and of the rules around land values and viability—that could make an immediate difference. My Bill, which is supported by Shelter and the Town and Country Planning Association, seeks to reform our planning system to deliver the fair outcomes communities desperately need and to accelerate the delivery of genuinely affordable social housing.

The housing crisis is the single biggest practical issue facing communities across the whole country. The critical challenge for our planning system is to deliver the genuinely affordable social homes that are urgently needed in so many places, but there are some major problems that limit the effectiveness of our planning system and work in favour of landowners against the interests of communities.

Too many of the current mechanisms designed to deliver fair outcomes from the planning and development process essentially amount to shutting the door after the horse has bolted. Local planning authorities are required to negotiate affordable housing contributions with a definition of “affordable” that has no relationship to income, and the price of land, which is a key determinant of how many affordable homes are considered “viable”, can be hugely inflated by landowner expectations of a right to “hope value”—future speculative value based on planning permissions which the landowner does not own and has not realised, and which are not confirmed in law.

Our planning system is in need of major reform. The Government’s definition of affordable housing includes homes to buy at up to £450,000 and homes to rent at up to 80% of market rent. I and my party support the delivery of affordable entry-level homes to buy, and although I believe that there are ways to deliver these homes that are more effective and give better value for money than the Help to Buy scheme, my Bill does not cover homes for sale; it addresses the definition of affordable homes to rent.

Market rents vary across the country. Westminster council warned in 2013 that 80% of market rent would require a household income of more than £100,000 to sustain a tenancy on a three-bedroom home, while a two-bedroom home in Southwark in the same year would require £44,000—more than double the average household income in the borough.

The role of affordable housing has always been to meet the needs of those who cannot afford to rent or buy housing in the private market, yet the current definition has completely broken the ability of the planning system to deliver sufficiently for those in the greatest housing need. The figures bear this out. Over the past 10 years, the number of social homes built each year has fallen from around 30,000 to 6,400. At the same time, the number of so-called affordable homes at up to 80% of market rent has increased to 47,000. With 1.25 million families on the waiting list for social housing, there is no justification for a policy that fails to deliver homes that are affordable to households with low incomes. My Bill re-establishes the link between the definition of affordable and income, replacing the current definition of up to 80% of market price with a definition of “no more than 35% of net household income for lowest quartile income groups in each local authority area”.

Just as important as the definition of affordable homes is the cost of the land on which they are built. Despite reforms introduced last year, which were welcomed, our planning system still affords landowners the right to the future value of development rights or planning permission, which are granted by and in the gift of the planning authority. This so-called hope value dramatically inflates the cost of land, and inflated land prices make it much more difficult for councils to buy land in order to deliver social housing.

In a recent example in south London, a site with an existing use value of £5 million was put on the market at £25 million on the assumption that it could be developed for housing. It was later withdrawn from the market on the expectation that the value would rise even further, setting back the delivery of any housing at all on that site by years and making it almost impossible to deliver affordable housing, even by the current broken definition. This inflation of value either places sites far beyond the reach of councils and housing associations or requires a significant quantum of private homes to be built to
cover the costs—homes that either push up density to levels that are unacceptable to the surrounding community or are built at the expense of genuinely affordable homes.

The current viability rules were developed to encourage and stimulate building in a recession, but they have evolved to become something quite different: a quasi-scientific basis for negotiation between developers and councils, with the overt objective on the part of developers of reducing their obligation to build affordable housing. The current system enables this to happen, as viability arguments can justify an appeal against refusal, and cash-strapped councils are reluctant to risk having to pay the applicant’s appeal costs if they lose. These negotiations are often not between equals, as councils struggle to resource the expertise they need to interrogate developers’ figures, and they also slow down planning, often taking years to resolve, creating great uncertainty and frustration.

It is vital that our planning system provides certainty and transparency, and puts an end to speculation on land values that prevents land from being used to deliver new homes. While landowners should receive fair compensation, coded in law, they should not be entitled to speculative value that does not arise from any action or effort on their part. My Bill creates a new requirement in planning law for local planning authorities to have a duty to include a policy in their local plans to capture betterment values where they arise, formally establishing a legal duty in the planning system to capture land value to be used for the benefit of communities and creating a strong justification for councils to argue for the resources they need to engage in viability discussions on equal terms with applicants.

Finally, my Bill seeks to specify in law the key factors used for viability testing in relation to planning decisions, including placing explicit limitations on the expectations of developer profit and land values for compulsory purchase, providing greater certainty and transparency for both landowners and communities. Specifically, my Bill would: amend section 19 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, as amended, and add to it a statutory definition of an affordable home for the purpose of all planning decisions; make further changes to sections 14 to 16 of the Land Compensation Act 1961, as amended; and introduce a new statutory definition of the key factors used for viability testing in relation to planning decisions.

In the context of a national housing crisis, our planning system must be able to deliver the genuinely affordable homes that communities need. More than this, communities must be able to trust that it will do so, and that the promises made in local plans and in planning applications will not be watered down later on the ground of viability. My Bill will reform our planning system to place community need at its heart and increase the speed and quantum of affordable housing delivery to address the housing crisis. I am grateful to Members from across the House who have indicated their support for the Bill, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Helen Hayes, Mr Clive Betts, Rosie Cooper, Emma Dent Coad, Ms Harriet Harman, Mr George Howarth, Norman Lamb, Caroline Lucas, Jess Phillips, Andy Slaughter, Alex Sobel and Sir Gary Streeter present the Bill.

Helen Hayes accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March, and to be printed (Bill 344).
Points of Order

2.5 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In relation to the next item, the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) (No. 2) Bill, we have had no amendments to the law in relation to the Finance Bill, Opposition days are as rare as rocking horse dung, we have a Prime Minister who has got dipping and diving off to an art form, and now we are nodding through £242 billion-worth of current expenditure and £39 billion-worth of capital. Can you advise how the House could better hold this Government to account for the way in which they are spending the hard-earned cash of taxpayers?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, the answer to which, in essence, is twofold. First, the procedure for the treatment of supply and appropriations Bills is contained in Standing Order No. 56 on page 52 of the Standing Orders—a fact of which I suspect the hon. Gentleman, who is well read, is keenly aware—so procedural propriety has been observed, whatever his disquiet or consternation might be. Secondly, the estimates day debates on important matters took place yesterday, when those matters were addressed by the House. The hon. Gentleman has made his point in his own way with some alacrity, and it is on the record for colleagues to study.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker—

Mr Speaker: Well, I am not sure that there is a further point to be made to that, but there is a cheeky grin etched upon the contours of the right hon. Gentleman’s face, which suggests to me that he is about to have some parliamentary fun. Far be it from me to seek to deny the right hon. Gentleman, who is a distinguished Lincolnshire knight.

Sir Edward Leigh: Further to that point order, I just wanted to remind the House that the Procedure Committee has ensured in its report that estimates days now actually deal with estimates and talk about money, whereas before, when I rose to talk about estimates, I was ruled out of order. We are now holding an inquiry into setting up a Budget Committee, so the House is trying to make progress on getting better oversight of public expenditure. This is just to inform you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: That is a noted reform that has occurred, in response to representations from Members on both sides of the House. In making that point—that public service information notice, if you will—the right hon. Gentleman gives me the opportunity to reference the Procedure Committee. He cited it, but he was far too modest to mention the fact that he is a distinguished ornament of it and a contributor on a continuing basis to its work.

SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION (ANTICIPATION AND ADJUSTMENTS) (NO. 2) BILL

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 56), That the Bill be now read a Second time. Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Question put forthwith, That the Bill be now read the Third time. Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) (No. 2) Bill and the reform of the estimates process came in response to the introduction of the ridiculous English votes for English laws procedures, but they represent the supply element of the confidence and supply arrangement. I may not be looking properly, but I do not see any Members from the Government’s confidence and supply partners in the Chamber, so is the vote that we have just had actually valid?

Mr Speaker: There is no requirement for any particular hon. Member to be present at any given time. The vote remains valid. Whether the hon. Gentleman, who rejoices in the celebrity of his status as his party’s Chief Whip, is satisfied with the process is a matter for him, but it is a quite different matter from the question of orderly conduct and procedure, which have been observed.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

Ordered,

That, at this day’s sitting, the Speaker shall put the questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the motion in the name of the Prime Minister relating to the UK’s withdrawal from the EU not later than 7.00pm; such questions shall include the questions on any amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; the questions may be put after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply. (Wendy Morton.)
UK’s Withdrawal from the EU

Mr Speaker: I have provisionally selected the following amendments in the following order: (a) in the name of Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn); (k) in the name of the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford); (c) in the name of the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman); (b) in the name of the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa); and (f) in the name of the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper).

I remind the House that reference may be made in debate to any amendments on the Order Paper, including those which I have not selected. Under the terms of the business motion just agreed to, the debate may continue until 7 pm, at which time the question shall be put on any amendments that may then be moved. To move the motion, I call the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office.

2.12 pm

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): I beg to move.

That this House notes the Prime Minister’s statement on Leaving the European Union of 26 February 2019; and further notes that discussions between the UK and the EU are ongoing.

It is a pleasure, as always, to return to the Dispatch Box to debate European policy matters and to see the familiar cast of colleagues on both sides of the House. I start by making it clear that the Government’s political objectives remain to leave the European Union in accordance with the referendum decision of 2016, to do so in an orderly fashion that protects jobs, living standards and investment in this country, and to do so by means of a formal withdrawal agreement under article 50 that includes clear protections for European Union citizens living in the United Kingdom and United Kingdom citizens in the 27 other EU countries, that provides for a financial settlement, and that ensures that there is no hard border on the island of Ireland. We look forward to negotiating a deep and special partnership on trade, security and political co-operation with the European Union—a community of democracies that will remain not only our closest geographical neighbours, but key partners friends and allies in the world.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend, with whom I have been debating such matters for the best part of 30 years, for giving way. As for this community of democracies, how can he can justify article 4 of the withdrawal agreement, which would subjugate the United Kingdom and require us to pass primary legislation to achieve that objective when the decisions that would be imposed on the constituents of every single Member in this House, by virtue of what goes on in the Council of Ministers, will be decided by 27 other member states? We will not even be at the table and will not have even so much as a transcript. Is that not a complete travesty of democracy?

Mr Lidington: No. As my hon. Friend says, he and I have been debating European matters for about 30 years—time flies when one is enjoying oneself—but I think his criticisms would have force if they were describing a situation that was intended to be permanent. All that is covered in article 4 of the withdrawal agreement are the arrangements that are necessary to govern the winding down of this country’s membership of the European Union and the residual obligations that derive from that over a period of months.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): In recent days, a number of statements have been made by several different Ministers that have left me somewhat puzzled about, first, Her Majesty’s Government’s policy and, secondly, the policy on collective responsibility. Is my right hon. Friend able to provide some clarification to assist the House?

Mr Lidington: The Government’s policy is what the Prime Minister set out in her statement yesterday and is summarised in the words that I have just spoken. The approach to collective responsibility is set out clearly in the ministerial code.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): On a more positive note, in order to get the withdrawal agreement through, which we should all want, does my right hon. Friend agree that it is not necessary to unpick it? Under international law, we could have a conditional interpretative declaration stating that the backstop is not permanent. If we get that and if the Attorney General changes his mind, will my right hon. Friend join me in urging all my Brexitite colleagues to vote for this agreement, because the choice is no longer perhaps between an imperfect deal and no deal, but between an imperfect deal and no Brexit?

Mr Lidington: I agree with my hon. Friend. We all wish my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General well in his continuing talks with representatives of the European Commission.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): I am immensely grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. Is he aware that the atmosphere in this debate is changing from a massive concern about crashing out and the damage that might do, to, among those of us who want to leave, a worry that we will get no Brexit at all? Therefore, may I through him tell the European Research Group that the choice that we will face when the Prime Minister’s deal comes back is whether we have the certainty of some deal or, as the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) said, no deal at all?

Mr Lidington: The right hon. Gentleman accurately encapsulates the decision facing every hon. Member, from whichever political party or grouping they come.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way, because this may help us later in the debate. Can he provide some clarity about whether the Government will in fact support amendment (b), tabled by the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa)? As I understand it, the hon. Gentleman has been sacked for doing so, but the Home Secretary is supportive of the amendment. I am confused, so will the right hon. Gentleman set out where the Government stand on the issue?
Mr Lidington: This may not be the first or last time that the right hon. Gentleman has been confused, but he will have to contain his excitement until I deal with the amendments that have been tabled.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman clarify something following the Prime Minister's statement yesterday? If the Prime Minister's deal is defeated when it returns to the House and if leaving with no deal is also defeated, will the time period in the motion proposing an extension of article 50 that will be brought on 14 March be amendable by the House?

Mr Lidington: Whether a motion is capable of amendment and which amendments are in order is, of course, always a matter for the Chair, rather than for Ministers, but I would point out that, in addition to the opportunities for amendment that would arise on such a motion in the normal course of events—I cannot predict at this moment how the Chair will rule—the obligations on the Government in the circumstances that the right hon. Gentleman describes in respect of section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 will also remain.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): The Minister will be well aware that we are approaching the 21st anniversary of the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement on 10 April, just days after we are due to Brexit. I had assumed, and I want him to confirm this, that in the light of the Government's repeated emphasis on their commitment to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement throughout the Brexit negotiations, and rightly so, the Government have been busy organising and planning a significant event to mark their commitment to the Belfast agreement. Will he shed some light on that anniversary event?

Mr Lidington: The detail of any event to mark this anniversary would be a matter for my right hon. Friend the Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) is that the Government, and I personally, regard the achievement of the Belfast agreement and the development of the peace-making and peace-building process in Northern Ireland as one of the most significant political achievements of successive Governments of different political parties in this country during my career in this House.

I remember being called to a meeting in John Major's office with other Government Back Benchers when he first reported on the message he had received from back channels to Sinn Féin-IRA about the prospect of a process opening up, and I know how much he, Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, David Cameron and my right hon. Friend the present Prime Minister have committed themselves to that process. I believe that every hon. Member of this House will share that commitment.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Does the Minister agree that the phrase “Government policy” implies not just the offering of a choice to the House but an expression by the Government of a preference as to the outcome of that choice? If he does agree, will he inform today's debate by saying what the Government's policy will be on either voting for a no-deal Brexit or extending article 50?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman is asking me to speculate about hypothetical events. My energies and the Government's energies are focused on achieving a negotiated agreement with the European Union behind which a majority of hon. and right hon. Members would be prepared to rally.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): In relation to the Minister's answer to the Chair of the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), the Prime Minister was very clear yesterday that, if the House voted for an extension, she would bring forward the necessary legislation to change the exit date commensurate with that extension. Can the Minister provide some more clarity? Is he talking about, for example, bringing in a statutory instrument immediately after such a vote to make it happen? Or is he talking about some other way of changing the date? It would be helpful to have some clarity on that point.

Mr Lidington: I will come to that point when I address the amendment in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman).

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree, further to the point made by the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), that a good way to commemorate the signing of the Good Friday agreement would be to encourage the European Union to define what it means by “temporary,” as listed in article 1(4) of the Northern Ireland protocol? Without some certainty on that, it is difficult to see how the withdrawal agreement is compatible with the Good Friday agreement.

Mr Lidington: I agree that the question about the definition of “temporary” is important, particularly in the light of the position, which the European Union has consistently taken in its negotiations with us over the past two years, that a withdrawal agreement negotiated under the terms of article 50 cannot be a secure legal basis for the creation of a permanent partnership with a third country.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Lidington: If the House will forgive me, I have given way quite a lot and I want to move on to the substance of my speech.

At the end of this afternoon's debate, this House will have a choice on the Government's motion and the various amendments that Mr Speaker has selected, but by 12 March, at the latest, the House will have a more important choice when we bring back a second meaningful vote. There has been a lot of speculation, and we have already heard it in the debate this afternoon, about what should happen if the House declines to vote for a deal. Let me start by saying why I am confident that the Prime Minister will be able to put before the House a deal that it can support, and why this House should support such a deal.
My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister spoke yesterday of the extensive work that has been taking place to make good on this House’s call for legal changes to guarantee that the Northern Ireland backstop cannot endure indefinitely. The House endorsed an amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady) on 29 January. Since then, the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the Attorney General and I have been engaging in focused discussions with the EU, with the different institutions of the EU and with member state Governments to find a way forward that would work for both sides. We are making good progress in that work, with constructive discussions taking place this week.

As hon. Members will also have heard, there have been discussions on the political declaration, including additions or changes to increase the focus and ambition of both sides to deliver the future partnership, which we both seek, as soon as possible. The ideas we are putting forward in those discussions are not simply the Government’s; they reflect the intensive dialogue we have had with Members on both sides of the House. I have met the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) once and am keen to do so again, as he knows, and I have met colleagues from other political parties and colleagues representing all shades of opinion on this country’s relationship with the European Union.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend is being very generous in giving way. Before he moves on to the question of alternative arrangements, he and the Brexit Secretary are to be strongly congratulated on getting the European Union to accept the need to set up a taskforce of experienced officials on the European side and the UK side to work up the arrangements proposed by our working group. Will he guarantee that, once those proposals are accepted, there will be a commitment in the treaty that is legally binding and will commit the Government and the European Union to a definite and definitive date by which those arrangements will be implemented?

Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friend has been championing this approach for a long time. I am grateful to him and to other Conservative colleagues for their detailed discussions with my right hon. Friend the Brexit Secretary and others about the alternative arrangements to ensure the absence of a hard border in Northern Ireland. Let us not forget that the term “alternative arrangements” features in both the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration, so it is already a known concept in the documents that have previously been agreed.

This has led to the consideration of a joint work stream with the European Union that will take place during the next phase of our negotiations. Our objective is to ensure that we have a set of alternative arrangements that can be used even in the absence of a full future relationship deal at the end of the implementation period. The EU has agreed to prioritise what will be an important work stream in the next phase, but we will also be setting up domestic structures to take advice from external experts, from businesses that trade with the European Union and beyond, and from colleagues across the House. This will be supported by civil service resources and £20 million of Government funding.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman mentions a hard border and the backstop. Does he understand why the Irish Government last week produced a Bill, which is going through Parliament, to deal with any problem arising if we happen to go out on World Trade Organisation terms, yet there was no mention of any infrastructure and any hard border? How come the Irish Government can do that, but we are saying that the hard border is such a huge issue?

Mr Lidington: It is for the Irish Government to explain their policy. We will also have to deal, as I am assuming they will, with the reality of the plans that the European Commission published in December, in which it stated plainly that from the day the UK departs the EU, in the absence of a transitional period, as provided for under the withdrawal agreement, the full acquis in terms of tariffs and regulatory checks and inspections would have to be applied. One striking thing about that Commission publication was that it made no specific reference to, or provided no exemption for, the situation in Ireland. That is something for the Government of Ireland to take up with the European Commission, but it is part of the legal and political reality with which Governments are also dealing.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I wish to pursue the question asked by the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson). Would I be correct in understanding that these discussions that are going on about the backstop relate purely to the next phase of the negotiations and what can be done in relation to the political declaration, and do not involve any question of opening up the withdrawal agreement and changing its force? That is right, is it not? If we look at the Prime Minister’s statement yesterday, we see that it was all about the next phase—a “work stream in the next phase”, as the right hon. Gentleman just said. Will he clarify that: it is not about opening up the withdrawal agreement?

Mr Lidington: Let me be clear that when the Attorney General has been talking to representatives of the European Commission this week and when my right hon. Friend the Brexit Secretary has been talking to them, they have been talking about changes to the overall terms of the agreement to facilitate our orderly departure from the European Union.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Ind): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for what he did yesterday with the publication of the summary of the no-deal papers—let me put it that way. My question to him is: why are the Government only now, after two and a half years, looking at these alternative arrangements, given that the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs did an enormous amount of work on finding some alternatives—they travelled the world—but came to the conclusion that there are no alternatives some considerable time ago?

Mr Lidington: I thank the right hon. Lady for what she said about the papers published yesterday. I thought she was being uncharacteristically unfair to the Government...
in her criticisms about not dealing with this earlier. A lot of official and ministerial time has been spent in the past 18 months examining some of these things. One problem that was identified, which still confronts us today and which we are talking to the European Commission about in the context of these discussions about alternative arrangements, is that we have to deal not only with the problem of the technology itself and making sure there is technology that is fit for purpose, but with the fact that, on the sort of model that has been discussed, we would need to see a significant number of derogations by the EU from its normal arrangements. So there are legal, and not just technical, problems that would have to be overcome.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that because the political declaration is legally non-binding, any concessions he gives on a level of alignment in respect of the single market, a customs union, standards and the environment are intrinsically changeable in the future, and that the only safeguard in place to prevent a slash-and-burn approach by a future Tory Government is the backstop itself?

Mr Lidington: I place rather more faith in this House than the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman would appear to do, because I do not think there is any appetite in Parliament for what he described as a “slash-and-burn approach” to standards.

We believe that our deal is the right one for this country and no better one is available on the table. I also believe, as do the Government, that leaving with our deal is better than leaving without a deal.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that because the political declaration is legally non-binding, any concessions he gives on a level of alignment in respect of the single market, a customs union, standards and the environment are intrinsically changeable in the future, and that the only safeguard in place to prevent a slash-and-burn approach by a future Tory Government is the backstop itself?

Mr Baron: I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman, but I am sure my right hon. Friend will agree that because the political declaration is legally non-binding, any concessions he gives on a level of alignment in respect of the single market, a customs union, standards and the environment are intrinsically changeable in the future, and that the only safeguard in place to prevent a slash-and-burn approach by a future Tory Government is the backstop itself.

Mr Lidington: I place rather more faith in this House than the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman would appear to do, because I do not think there is any appetite in Parliament for what he described as a “slash-and-burn approach” to standards.

We believe that our deal is the right one for this country and no better one is available on the table. I also believe, as do the Government, that leaving with our deal is better than leaving without a deal.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman is being typically generous in giving way to Members from all parts of the House. He was just referring to the position of other member states. Yesterday, the Prime Minister told us, for the first time, that she would countenance an extension to the article 50 period, but today President Macron of France is quoted as saying:

“We would support an extension…only if it was justified by a new choice of the British.”

He continued:

“we would in no way accept an extension without a clear objective.”

Is it not the case that if there is to be an extension, it must be an extension with a purpose, rather than for two or three months of the same parliamentary gridlock?

Mr Lidington: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman, and I do not think that what he has just said is any different from what the Prime Minister or other Ministers have been saying at this Dispatch Box for several months.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Unfortunately, my amendment (g), which sought to end the whole charade by revoking article 50, has not been accepted, and we have a series of Brexit-enabling amendments before us. I want to take the Minister back to his point about the concessions he is looking for from the European Union on borders. We know that the technology has not been invented and the idea is that we have derogations—so this involves concessions. If the EU is going to give concessions on that border, it will have to give them on every border, and the EU has multiple borders. So why would it not be doing this already? The reason is that we are back to UK pie-in-the-sky, fantasy thinking here—I hope the right hon. Gentleman accepts that.

Mr Lidington: The flaw in the hon. Gentleman’s logic is that it should be welcome to any Government or supranational authority such as the European Commission if technology and systems are available that streamline border processes, whether we are talking about the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, the border across the short straits, or other external borders of the European Union with third countries.
Dr Wollaston: I am glad that the Government have published at least the summary of the no-deal consequences, and hope that they will go much further and publish the detail. Has the Minister seen the detailed paper published in *The Lancet* this week about the health consequences of no deal? If he has not seen it, will he assure me that he will look in detail at those consequences? No responsible Government could inflict that kind of pain on their people.

Mr Lidington: I have not seen that particular paper but I will make sure that I look at it and draw it to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. I hope it is of some reassurance to the hon. Lady. That the Secretary of State has been making these preparations one of this very top priorities. He wrote to the leaders of the healthcare and pharmaceutical sectors in December last year, and the NHS executive is working hard to make sure that contingency arrangements are in place to ensure that supplies of medicines continue to be available.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I want to be a little bit helpful. In response to the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), the Minister basically said that he did not see any difference between what President Macron has said and what the Prime Minister said yesterday. There is a huge difference. The Prime Minister said yesterday that she would use an extension for more dither, delay, faffing and kicking the can down the road; President Macron is saying that there has to be a purpose to a delay. The purpose that is gaining more and more credibility across the House is precisely to put this matter to a public vote.

Mr Lidington: The hon. Lady does not characterise the Prime Minister’s words yesterday accurately at all. The Prime Minister could not have been clearer in many appearances at this Dispatch Box that in every conversation we have had with the European Commission or with Heads of member state Governments, they have said that were we at any stage to seek an extension of article 50, they would want to understand for how long one was being sought and the purpose for which it was being sought, so I do not think that anything President Macron said today came as a shock to us.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab) rose—

Mr Lidington: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I will try to give way to him later, but I hope he will let me move on for the moment.

The Government believe that leaving with our deal is better than leaving without a deal. Members who have seen the summary paper published yesterday, and other sources, too, will know that there is no avoiding the fact that an abrupt departure from the European Union without an agreement of any kind would lead to a shock to our economy, and that it would not be possible for a Government, even with the most meticulous planning of arrangements in this country, to mitigate and plan entirely for what might happen outside our own jurisdiction. In those circumstances we would, for example, be reliant on the readiness of the authorities in France and elsewhere to introduce streamlined checks and procedures, or on the readiness of the European Commission to allow a short-term derogation from its normal rules and practices.

As a responsible Government, we have therefore been taking appropriate steps to minimise that disruption and have published extensive information to ensure the country is prepared. We have published and updated 106 technical notices and contacted the 145,000 businesses that trade with the European Union to help them to prepare for no-deal customs procedures.

It is a fact that as long as this House is unable to agree to an alternative course of action and get behind a particular agreement on exit from the European Union, businesses and individuals will have to plan for and take action as well. The Government have taken and will continue to take steps to provide businesses and citizens with advice to help them to make preparations to mitigate the potential impacts of a no-deal Brexit. The paper published yesterday showed that there are more actions that businesses should consider taking and which the Government urge them to plan for as necessary.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con) rose—

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con) rose—

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) rose—

Mr Lidington: I will give way to my hon. Friend. Friend for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) first, then to my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and to the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), and then I will move on.

Gareth Johnson: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way; I think the whole House appreciates his generosity. As he knows, the meaningful vote needs to return to this House by 12 March. If that vote falls, we will presumably move on the following day to debate whether to rule out no deal. Will my right hon. Friend and other members of the Government vote in favour of that or against it?

Mr Lidington: I do not blame my hon. Friend for having a good try, but one thing I have learned in my years here, and which has perhaps been reinforced by my observation of events in recent weeks, is that although I may at some stage wish to give advice to my right hon. Friends the Chief Whip and the Prime Minister about whipping for any actual or hypothetical motion, I will do it not from the Dispatch Box but in private instead.

Antoinette Sandbach: I am sure my right hon. Friend will be aware that a lot of small businesses have not put in place no-deal preparations. Many of them may have been misled or given the impression by comments made in this House that tariff-free trade may be available for 10 years under article 24 of the general agreement on tariffs and trade. The document published by the Government makes it crystal clear that those GATT 24 provisions are not available. I encourage my right hon. Friend to make that clear so that small businesses in my constituency and throughout the country do not rely on what they may think has been publicised as an option when it is not one.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Our right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade has publicly rebutted the arguments.
about article 24 of the general agreement on tariffs and trade, and the reference in the paper published yesterday was a reference to his remarks. The Government are stepping up their communications to business about that point. We accept that in this country, and also among our major trading partners, such as France and Germany, it tends to be small and medium-sized enterprises that for all the obvious reasons do not have the capacity to spend a lot of time monitoring what Governments are saying, and therefore may be further behind in their planning than the larger companies. We will do our utmost to try to communicate better with them.

If I may move on—

Yvette Cooper rose—

Mr Lidington: I beg the right hon. Lady's pardon. I shall give way to her, then I would like to address the various amendments that have been selected.

Yvette Cooper: The question from the hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) is so important, because businesses are still worrying and having to move money, jobs and assets abroad because they do not know what is going on. The Minister could give those businesses huge clarity by simply saying that the Government will vote against no deal if it comes to a vote on 13 March. This is really important, because we need to know the status of the commitments that the Prime Minister made yesterday. The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has previously dismissed motions passed by this House. He said in reference to previous motions against no deal:

"Frankly, the legislation takes precedence over the motion"—[Official Report, 14 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 1070]

and he also said that the Government’s policy continued to be to leave with no deal on 29 March if a deal was not passed by this House. Will the Minister confirm that as a result of the Prime Minister’s statement yesterday, that policy has now changed, and that Government policy is at least to be bound by the will of this House if no deal is passed by 13 March, rather than simply to leave without a deal?

Mr Lidington: The short answer is yes, but I will flesh that out when I respond in more detail to the selected amendments. The words that the Prime Minister used yesterday were ones that had been discussed and agreed at the Cabinet meeting yesterday morning. On the right hon. Lady’s earlier question to me, I think she is leapfrogging too lightly over the fact that, before we get into any debate or motions about how we respond to a potential decision on exiting without a deal, it is the Government’s clear intention to bring forward to this House a motion on a revised deal and to invite the House to support that. I will be supporting the Government when that vote is brought forward, just as I supported the Government on the previous meaningful vote. That decision will remain the earliest possible opportunity for this House to end the uncertainty that businesses and individuals are now experiencing, as she rightly said.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): With the greatest respect, I think the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) and the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) is absolutely key to understanding what the Prime Minister said yesterday. I entirely understand that my right hon. Friend is retreating, as the Prime Minister does, to the argument that the aim is to get a withdrawal agreement, and I support what he says on that. If it does not get a majority—it was defeated by 230 at the first attempt—the key thing to know is whether the Government will actually vote in favour of an extension, or whether they will vote in favour of leaving with no deal. The Cabinet must have considered that when they sorted out their differences yesterday in what was, no doubt, a perfectly private, orderly and good-humoured meeting.

Mr Lidington: My right hon. and learned Friend is asking me to comment on a hypothetical whipping decision on a hypothetical vote that the Government do not wish or intend us to confront. We will be voting as a House in favour of the revised deal, which will reflect elements that this House, on 29 January, said it wanted to see changed in order to be able to support the withdrawal agreement wholeheartedly. Exactly the same challenge that my right hon. and learned Friend has posed would be posed in respect of any hypothetical event on the Bill tabled by the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). At this stage, it is too early to make those assertions on a hypothetical situation. What we are focused on, and where our energies lie, is negotiating an agreement with our partners in the European Union that delivers on the conditions that this House set when it passed the amendment in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady).

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con) rose—

Mr Lidington: I will give way one last time to my hon. Friend, and then I will make some progress, otherwise I will never get on to the amendments.

Mr Fysh: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend. Just before he moves on, I would like to ask one question about the no-deal advice paper. When was it prepared, and why did it not mention the use of the transit system, which means that goods can be delivered into Europe without having to be stopped and checked at Calais?

Mr Lidington: Instructions were given to draft that paper following the previous debate during which the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) agreed to withdraw the amendment in her name calling for the publication of Cabinet papers, following an assurance given from the Dispatch Box by the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris). I then spoke to the right hon. Lady to ascertain the information that she wanted. What we have produced is a thorough document, which I am satisfied can be traced in all details to documents that have gone before Cabinet or Cabinet Committees. Internally, I have been able to footnote every assertion made in that paper. We took the words of the right hon. Lady’s amendment in seeking material that had been given to Cabinet and to Cabinet Committees, and the content of the document was determined by that categorisation.
Anna Soubry rose—

Mr Lidington: As I have referred to the right hon. Lady, I will give way to her and then I will make some progress.

Anna Soubry: The right hon. Gentleman is, as ever, being very generous. It is very important to make this clear. I took a sample of the many papers from which this document has been compiled, and I can assure the House that, from my reading of the contents of those papers, it is an accurate and fair summary. Furthermore, the original document that I was given was then edited and updated—that is how up to date it is. I am confident about that. I now want the detail, but that is another matter.

Mr Lidington: I am very grateful to the right hon. Lady for that.

I will, if I may, move on to the various amendments that have been tabled. Let me move straight to amendment (f) in the names of the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford and my right hon. Friends the Members for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) and for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman).

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before the right hon. Gentleman starts on this important process of critical analysis, to which we all look forward with eager expectation, I simply point out to him that, as I am sure he is aware, he is currently on 44 minutes. [Interruption.] A snap, I know, but it is 44 minutes.

Mr Lidington: I will try to restrain my appetite to take further interventions, Mr Speaker.

Yesterday, the Prime Minister set out three clear commitments to the House that should provide reassurance and clarity about the way forward. First, we will hold a second meaningful vote by Tuesday 12 March at the latest. Secondly, if the Government have not brought forward a further meaningful vote, or if we have lost such a second meaningful vote by Tuesday 12 March, then we will, in addition to the Government’s obligations—I stress that this is in addition to, not in place of them—table a neutral, amendable motion under section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 to be voted on by Wednesday 13 March, at the latest, asking this House if it supports leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement and a framework for a future relationship on 29 March this year. The United Kingdom will leave without a deal on 29 March only if there is explicit consent in this House for that outcome.

Thirdly, if this House, having rejected leaving with the deal negotiated with the EU, then also rejects leaving on 29 March without a withdrawal agreement and future framework, the Government will, on 14 March, bring forward a motion on whether Parliament wants to seek a short, limited extension to article 50. If the House votes for an extension, the Government will seek to agree that extension approved by the House with the EU and bring forward the necessary legislation to change the exit date commensurate with that extension. The Government are committing themselves to bring forward—and therefore to support—such legislation. These commitments all fit the timescale set out in the private Member’s Bill in the name of the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford. They are commitments made by the Prime Minister, and the Government will stick by them, as we have stuck by previous commitments to make statements and table amendable motions by specific dates.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): May I say that I enormously welcome the fact that my right hon. Friend has reiterated all that from the Dispatch Box? I have personally had no cause ever to doubt that what the Prime Minister states from the Dispatch Box will be anything other than fully fulfilled, but my right hon. Friend repeating it today is helpful, as were the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Brexit Secretary earlier this morning. In light of those remarks, it is my view that there is not a necessity to proceed in the way in which the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and I, with many others, would have wished to proceed in relation to amendment (c) and the Bill referred to in it.

Mr Lidington: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that intervention.

Yvette Cooper: If the Government were to bring forward legislation in accordance with a vote in Parliament, would they—as I presume—vote for that legislation? Will the right hon. Gentleman also explain what the circumstances would be if there were a disagreement between the Government and the EU about either the length or terms of the extension? Would the Government bring it back to Parliament for a further vote, rather than simply dismissing it and deciding to shift to no deal instead?

Mr Lidington: As the right hon. Lady knows, the Prime Minister said that an extension would be short and limited. It is clearly a fact of law that any extension to the article 50 period would have to be agreed with all the other 27 Governments; that just reflects the treaties. It logically follows that if the Prime Minister has committed the Government to bring forward legislation in those circumstances to comply with what would be the will of the House, the Government would therefore support such legislation.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): With the greatest respect, the Minister did not answer the other question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper)—what will the Government do if the EU does not want to agree to a short, time-limited extension? Will they come back to the House with a different proposal? [Interruption.] This is a serious matter. Government Members shake their heads, but we need to know. If the EU were to turn down the extension, what would happen? Would we crash out with no deal or would we have another chance perhaps to ask for a longer extension?

Mr Lidington: In the absence of either an agreement to extend article 50, to leave with a deal or to revoke article 50 all together, the default legal position under the treaties is that the exit date is two years after article 50 has been triggered; that is a matter of European law. The hon. Lady asks a perfectly serious question. I do not believe that the other Governments of the European Union have either an economic interest or a strategic
interest in seeing a chaotic departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union. My belief is that there would be a negotiated agreement in those circumstances. But as I said earlier, the new obligation that the Prime Minister announced yesterday is in addition to the ones that would already flow in those circumstances as a result of section 13 of the withdrawal Act—that is, section 13 as modified by the two amendments successfully moved by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve). Therefore, the matter would come back to the House and there would be an opportunity for right hon. and hon. Members to table amendments to urge particular courses of action.

Nick Boles (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Lidington: I am conscious of the concern about time that you expressed, Mr Speaker, but I will briefly give way to my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) and then to my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles).

Mrs Main: I have listened very carefully to just about every debate on this topic, and I understand that the European Union would give an extension only if it thought there was a reasonableness behind the request; I can perfectly understand that. Will my right hon. Friend tell me what rationale we would give to ask for this very short and limited extension, given that the House will have already rejected the newly negotiated deal? I cannot think what else could happen in those couple of months that would be helpful.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is asking me to go deeper into the realms of hypothetical speculation. Tempting though that is, all I can say is that a lot would depend on where we had got to in the negotiations, the reasons for which the House in these hypothetical circumstances had rejected the revised agreement and so on.

Nick Boles: Nobody has a better understanding of these issues than my right hon. Friend and there is nobody whose word I would trust more completely at the Dispatch Box. But this is very important detail, and he has referred to the fact that the Prime Minister made commitments yesterday that replicated the provisions in the draft Cooper-Letwin Bill, which we are hoping not to have to move as a result. Now, that Bill very specifically makes provision to come back to the House with whatever had been negotiated with the European Union to seek the approval of the House for that actual extension, and it is extremely important that we have that same provision confirmed here today at the Dispatch Box. If we do not, I for one will feel bound to continue with the process of supporting amendment (c) in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), and then tomorrow supporting the Bill. If we can have that reassurance from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster that the House will get a chance to approve whatever final extension length is agreed between the Government and the European Union—if it were different from the one to which the House had previously consented—I will be happy.

Mr Lidington: The straight answer is yes, of course. Frankly, I just do not see any circumstance in which, if a period had been agreed with the European Union or had the potential to be agreed, the Government would not bring this back to the House. Were the Government not to bring it back, it would be brought back anyway under the provisions of section 13 in the way in which I described in response to an earlier intervention, so I think I can give my hon. Friend that clear reassurance on that point.

Sir Oliver Letwin: I thought that that answer was extraordinarily helpful. I agree with my right hon. Friend entirely that the provision actually already exists under section 13, but I think that his confirmation of the attitude of the Government to that matter settles the thing.

Mr Lidington: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for that intervention.

Stephen Doughty: The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster is extremely generous and I also take his word very seriously. He did not quite answer my earlier question about the legislation on the extension that he and the Prime Minister have made repeated commitments to bring forward. What would be the form of that legislation? Would it be possible, for example, for the dates to be changed? As my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), who chairs the Exiting the European Union Committee, also asked, how would such disputes be dealt with?

Mr Lidington: I do not think that I can go into detail on the legislation at this stage. It would depend a bit on what the outcome of the negotiations with the European Union itself had led to. If it were secondary legislation, clearly there are the normal constraints on amendments. Equally, if it is secondary legislation, it is sudden death in both Houses; both Houses have a veto over secondary legislation. The section 13 provisions do give the House a safeguard that there is always that additional opportunity to bring forward and vote on concerns that the House feels are being overlooked.

Let me turn to amendment (c). I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset for indicating that he thought that this amendment would not now need to be pressed to a vote. If the House will allow me, in the light of his comments, I do not propose to go into detail about this amendment, but if it is brought up further in the debate, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State can respond to those points when he winds up.

I now want to refer to amendment (b) in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa). On citizens’ rights, he has succeeded in persuading both the Leader of the Opposition and my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) that he and others have succeeded in persuading both the Leader of the Opposition and my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) that they were too enthusiastic about amendment (c) as lead signatories to an amendment. All Members of this House are aware of how vocally and passionately my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire has campaigned...
on the issue of citizens’ rights for many months now. This is an area that the Government take extremely seriously. We have consistently put citizens’ rights first in our negotiations. It was one of the very first parts of the withdrawal agreement to have been agreed and had negotiations completed with the European Union. Of course, the best way to guarantee those rights, both for our citizens in the EU and EU citizens here, is to vote in favour of the deal, as my hon. Friend did in January.

But there is a lot of uncertainty surrounding no deal. That is why the Government have already committed that the rights of the 3 million EU citizens living in the UK will be protected in any scenario. EU citizens resident here by 29 March would be able to apply for the EU settlement scheme to secure their status. The Home Office has already granted more than 100,000 applications under that scheme and such people will continue to have access to social security and healthcare as before.

Also lying behind my hon. Friend’s amendment is concern about the rights of UK nationals living elsewhere in the EU. In the absence of a deal, this would be a matter for the EU and its member states. Despite the welcome progress made by some member states, there are other areas where the offer to UK nationals, in our view, falls short. Access to healthcare is a particular concern. The Government, led by the Foreign Secretary, are seeking solutions to address these issues through bilateral contacts with member state Governments at the same time as seeking a common EU-wide approach. We should not, though, underestimate the challenge in reaching a joint UK-EU commitment, as the amendment calls for, to ring-fence the agreement on citizens’ rights. The European Union has been very consistent in saying to us that its legal mandate is clear that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed, and that its view, if these issues were not addressed in the withdrawal agreement, is that there are significant legal problems for the EU in protecting these rights since, in those circumstances, some of these issues would fall within the competence of member states and not of the EU institutions.

Despite those challenges, we do share with my hon. Friend the common goal of protecting the rights of citizens in the event of no deal. So in view of the fact that our political objectives are the same, the Government will accept his amendment today, and following this debate—assuming that the House endorses the amendment—I believe the Government’s approach that he adopts, which includes analysis in copious detail of propositions advanced by other colleagues, perhaps to reach his peroration?

I will move on to amendment (k) and then amendment (a). Amendment (k), in the name of the leader of the Scottish National party in Westminster, wills certain ends without any means. It asserts a determination not to leave the European Union without a withdrawal agreement and future framework under any circumstances and regardless of any exit date. It is therefore asserting a power to override what is actually in the European Union treaties but can have no effect in terms of European law and the implications of the article 50 process. While I understand the political motives behind amendment (k), the problem with it is that it ignores the legal reality that, once article 50 has been triggered, the only ways in which to avoid what the amendment seeks to avoid are to agree a deal or to revoke article 50 altogether and commit this country permanently—in good faith, to use the terms of the Court of Justice judgment—to membership of the European Union for the future. For those reasons, the Government cannot accept it.

I have also seen and studied the amendment tabled in the name of the Leader of the Opposition. I would urge Opposition Members to look at what my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said in her reply to the right hon. Gentleman, because on each of the five points detailed in the amendment, I believe the Government’s approach provides the right answer for the people of the United Kingdom. Let me briefly take each of those five points in turn. First, the amendment instructs Ministers to seek a permanent—

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Minister has now been on his feet for over an hour. Is there anything that you could think of doing from the Chair to exhort him perhaps to reach his peroration?

Mr Speaker: Well, it has been 63 minutes. The Minister for the Cabinet Office is known for the intellectual approach that he adopts, which includes analysis in copious detail of propositions advanced by other colleagues, but I feel sure that he is nearing that peroration, which is keenly anticipated.

Mr Lidington: It is the hon. Gentleman’s hon. Friends, as well other colleagues across the House, who have been seeking to intervene, and if somebody intervenes on me, I think, in justice, they deserve a considered response to the point that they have made.

Amendment (a) instructs Ministers to seek “a permanent...customs union”, but the political declaration already provides for the benefits of a customs union—no tariffs, quotas or checks on rules of origin. At the same time, the political declaration says that rather than trying to seek a voice in EU trade deals, the UK should have an independent trade policy. Beyond the label of “permanent...customs union”, it is not clear to me what outcomes the Labour amendment is seeking that the political declaration does not offer.

Secondly, the amendment instructs Ministers to seek “close alignment with the single market”, but the EU has already said that the deal provides for the closest relationship possible outside the single market, and frictionless trade in goods and agrifood is one of our key negotiating objectives. The truth is, looking at the EU position, that it has said that completely frictionless trade is possible only if we stay in the single market. That would mean accepting both free movement and...
EU state aid rules in full—things that the Labour party’s leadership has said it does not want to see. That is why, I assume, its amendment is ambiguous about what a “close” relationship really means.

Thirdly, the amendment instructs Ministers to seek “dynamic alignment on rights”. We are committed to ensuring that leaving the EU will not lead to any lowering of standards in relation to workers’ rights. We are prepared to commit to giving Parliament a vote on whether it wishes to follow suit in the future whenever EU standards in areas such as workers’ rights or health and safety are judged to have been strengthened.

Fourthly, the amendment instructs Ministers to seek “participation in EU agencies”. The political declaration sets out how we aim to participate in EU programmes in a number of areas and have the closest possible relationship with EU agencies in the heavily regulated sectors.

Fifthly, the amendment instructs us to seek “agreement on the detail of future security arrangements, including” participation in specific EU tools and measures. Anybody who has listened to the Prime Minister speak from the Dispatch Box, whether as Home Secretary or Prime Minister, can be in no doubt about her commitment to the closest, most effective possible partnership now and in the future between police and law enforcement agencies in this country and those in other parts of the European Union.

The amendment ignores the very real negotiating challenge of the EU’s position. It says that, as a third country outside the Schengen area and without free movement, there would be restrictions on the UK’s ability to participate in some EU tools and measures. We do a disservice to the House if we do not recognise the reality of that negotiating challenge.

The deal that the Government have negotiated provides the best way forward for this country to build its future relationship of friendship and deep partnership with the EU outside membership of the European Union. With the work that the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State and the Attorney General are undertaking to get the changes that this House has asked for to the Northern Ireland backstop, I believe we can come back with a deal that the House should be willing—not to endorse. That way, we will be able to deliver a result that honours the outcome of the 2016 referendum but does so in a way that protects the jobs, prosperity and security of citizens in every part of the United Kingdom.

3.21 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I rise to support amendment (a) in my name and the name of the Leader of the Opposition. It is two weeks since we last voted on a Government Brexit motion, but nothing has changed. The Government are no closer to making progress, and that is clear from the Prime Minister’s statement yesterday and underlined by the absurdly limited motion before us today. The motion tabled by the Prime Minister states that the House “notes” her statement of yesterday and “notes that discussions between the UK and EU are ongoing.”

The Government do not even dare lay a motion reflecting the decisions of 29 January, as they did last time. They are frightened to lay a motion even setting out what has already been agreed—namely, the so-called Brady amendment—and the rejection by this House of no deal as an acceptable outcome. The statement and motion just seek to buy another two weeks and note what they are doing, all of this with just 30 days to go.

One thing that has changed is the acceptance of the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa). I want to ask some questions about that, because yesterday the Prime Minister appeared to rule out accepting that amendment. This morning, the Home Secretary was before the Home Affairs Committee, and he was questioned by the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald). The Home Secretary said, “What’s wrong with the amendment? Nothing.” “So is the Government supporting it now?” “Yes, what do you mean ‘now’? When was the Government not supporting it? When did you hear that?” “Yesterday.” “From who?” “The Prime Minister.” “Did you?” [HON. MEMBERS: “Shambles!”] Well, that is a vignette of how Brexit has been going. The question is that the House is struggling with is why the hon. Member for South Leicestershire has been forced to resign when the Government are accepting his amendment.

Last time we had this debate, I set out the sorry history of the Government’s delays in recent months, and I do not intend to repeat that.

Lady Hermon: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for allowing me to intervene. I thought he was going to mention the other significant change, which is the Labour party’s policy on a second referendum. As he will know, the Prime Minister warned in January this year that a second referendum could “damage social cohesion”. Does the Labour party believe that the Prime Minister was wrong about that, or is it prepared to take that risk?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention. I will deal with it. I will come to the background and the amendment we have tabled, and I will answer that intervention. If I do not, I will take another intervention to ensure that I do.

There is, it seems, an expectation that between now and 12 March there will be a change to the deal, and I do not think that that is going to happen. Why? Because there has been no progress at all since the vote was pulled on 10 December. That is 79 days ago. That was when the Prime Minister said, “I’m going to seek changes. I know what the House wants.” No progress has been made since the meaningful vote was lost on 15 January, 43 days ago, and no progress has been made since the Brady amendment of 28 January, 30 days ago.

For all the talk of discussion here and in Brussels, the stark truth is that not one word of the withdrawal agreement or political declaration has changed since it was signed off on 25 November last year—not one word. That is 94 days—three months—ago. The expectation that all of that will change in the next 14 days seems extremely unlikely, and it is not going to be fulfilled. When the Prime Minister went off to do that, I said she was building an expectation that she would not be able to fulfil, and I fear that that is what we are heading for.

The deal today is the same as it was three months ago, and it is that basic deal that will be put before us again on 12 March. It may have some warm words around it, and the Attorney General may be asked to
say what those warm words mean, but the withdrawal agreement will be exactly the same in two weeks as it is now. We have to face up to that and stop deluding ourselves that it will change in the next 14 days. There are serious consequences if the deal does not go through because it is precisely the same, which is why there has been such questioning this morning about what happens next.

The deal has not changed because the Government have made three central demands. First, they have asked for a unilateral exit to the backstop. That has been roundly rejected every time it has been asked for, and the deal was signed off 94 days ago. Secondly, they have asked for a time limit to the backstop. That has been roundly rejected every time it has been asked for, and it was on the table 94 days ago. The only other ask is that the backstop be replaced by alternative arrangements. The EU’s response to that to the Government has been, “Well, what are you proposing? What are these alternatives, so that we can discuss them?” Nothing has been forthcoming.

We learned from the Prime Minister’s statement and the Minister for the Cabinet Office that a joint workstream will be considered by the EU and UK, which will be an “important strand”. I do not doubt that a joint workstream on alternative arrangements is a good idea. I do not doubt that any country would seek to streamline any checks at the border whatever the arrangements, irrespective of Brexit. That workstream will apparently work until the end of next year. The announcement that that workstream is in existence is hardly a breakthrough.

The idea that the deal that was so roundly rejected is now going to go through because there is a workstream on alternative measures seems to me unlikely, and that is why we have to get real about what is actually going to happen in two weeks’ time, and it is why we predict that we will be left with exactly the same deal.

On the alternative arrangements, the Minister for the Cabinet Office says that those words are used elsewhere in the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration. That is true, but they are used only in two respects with two different meanings. One is that the alternative arrangements are the future relationship. That is one meaning provided in those documents, but that is not relevant to this discussion because if the future relationship is ready, there is no question of a backstop. We all know that.

The only other way in which alternative arrangements are actually used in the documents is in relation to the technology at the border making all the difference. We have been searching for that for some time. I do not doubt there will be advances in technology, but the reason the backstop was put in is that the assessment back in November was that there was no prospect of that technology being ready by the time the backstop would be needed, and therefore we needed the backstop. That was the conclusion.

Since I have been in this role, I seem to have spent quite a lot of my time standing on borders looking at lorries and people going across borders. I went to the main Sweden-Norway border to see what a border looks like where a country is in the EEA, and therefore has single market alignment and free movement, but is not in a customs union. It is a hard stop—with infrastructure, with security, with paperwork—and when it works well, each stop takes 13 minutes. Those two countries are not operating the least efficient system that they can; they think they are operating the most efficient system that they can. I do not doubt that technology can be improved on, but I doubt that this workstream in the next few months is going to make the progress that many people in this House think is going to happen.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): The right hon. and learned Gentleman has referred to spending a lot of his time standing at borders. When he was at the border in Northern Ireland, was he able to see the complete and total complexity of that border, with the hundreds of crossing points, and has he grasped the total impossibility of anyone anywhere constructing a hard border that could not be avoided with ease?

**Keir Starmer**: I was and I have. I have visited that border many times. I visited it with the Police Service of Northern Ireland many times when I was working there for five years—as it policed the area around the border, which has particular issues—and I have been there since on a number of occasions. I am well aware of the nature of that border. I am also well aware of the fact, in relation to that border, that it is a mistake to think that the only issue is, technically, how to get people or goods over a line in the road. That border is the manifestation of peace: it is a settlement between two communities. Therefore, the very idea that this is just a technical exercise does not understand the nature of that border.

**Mr Dominic Grieve** (Beaconsfield) (Con): It goes beyond that, does it not? The right hon. and learned Gentleman may share my anxiety that this issue seems to be consistently ducked. We have a pre-existing international treaty with Ireland that places obligations on us in respect of the border. I do worry, and he may share this anxiety, that in this House this is constantly brushed under the carpet, whereas as we are a rule-of-law state that believes in the international rules-based system, we cannot depart from that without reneging on such obligations.

**Keir Starmer**: I am grateful for that intervention and I agree with it.

This is really the heart of it: we know what the problem is, we know what the House thinks about the backstop and we know that there is an unlikelihood that those problems are going to be addressed in the next 14 days. When the Prime Minister lost the first meaningful vote, she had a clear choice. Choice 1 was to plough on with the failed deal in the usual blinkered way, and eventually put the same deal back to us. That was option 1. Option 2 was to drop her red lines, and negotiate changes that were credible with the EU and could command a majority in this House. The Government have chosen the first course—blindly ploughing on, rather than really engaging—and, as we have seen from the last few weeks, that path leads nowhere.

That is regrettable, because there is an alternative, and I want to address amendment (a). We have set out this alternative repeatedly over recent months. It was set out in full in the letter from the Leader of the Opposition to the Prime Minister on 6 February, and it is spelled out in today’s amendment (a). I remind the House that the focus of the changes we are calling for are to the political declaration, not the backstop.
The changes are to negotiate a permanent and comprehensive UK-wide customs union. That is the first part. Why is that important? Because it is essential for protecting manufacturing, particularly the complex supply chains, and to avoid the hard border in Northern Ireland. I know that those on the Government Front Bench have, like me, gone to many of the big manufacturing companies to discuss with them their complex supply chains and how anxious they are about protecting the customs union arrangements that allow them to do that. As I said, it is also essential to avoiding a hard border in Northern Ireland.

Dr Murrison rose—

Keir Starmer: I will just make this point and then I will give way.

The Prime Minister has pretended that her customs proposals achieve that. I listened carefully to what the Minister for the Cabinet Office said about amendment (a). He said that, under the political declaration, the benefits are already there, because it notes that the single customs territory in the Northern Ireland backstop obviates the need for rules of origin checks. So the political declaration notes the backstop, which is the contentious bit of the withdrawal agreement. I concede that that is a form of customs union, because under the backstop that single customs territory obviates the need for rules of origin checks. The declaration goes on to say—that goes to the heart of what the Minister for the Cabinet Office just said—that if we build and improve on that customs union for the future partnership, we can continue to avoid customs checks.

Let us unpick that. If we build on the backstop, which is the bit that, as I understand it, many Government Members do not like, we can avoid customs checks. So, the temporary backstop—hopefully never to be used; only an insurance policy—has to become permanent, turbocharged and the foundation stone of the political declaration in order to get the protection of a customs union. That is precisely what the political declaration says.

I am not sure that the Minister for the Cabinet Office has explained that to all the Members behind him. If his proposition is that the backstop is just a short-term, temporary measure, whereas it is actually an essential foundation of the political relationship, I think that might be met with a particular response. The pretence that the political declaration equals the same as a customs union goes against the Government’s stated aim to be outside a customs union.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: I listened with care to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster’s response to the five principles at the end of his speech. Did it seem to the shadow Minister that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster disagreed with any of the five principles? I do not disagree with any of them. My right hon. Friend tried most of the time to demonstrate their compatibility with the political agreement. He might have hesitated, because in the Chequers policy the Government went beyond that and proposed a single market in goods—for about 48 hours. The shadow Minister raises negotiating points such as new trade agreements with other countries and what this would mean for freedom of movement, but all that will eventually be covered in the negotiations. Would it not help if Opposition and Government Front Benchers agreed on these five principles? That might transform the atmosphere of the debate when we move on to the next stage of the negotiations after the withdrawal agreement has been agreed.

Keir Starmer: As has been alluded to, I am having discussions with Government Front Benchers, including the Minister for the Cabinet Office. I do not intend to disclose what has been said in confidence in those discussions. They will continue, and we will play our part in them. We are trying to set up the next meeting, which we will hold as soon as possible.

Several hon. Members rose—

Keir Starmer: I will give way, but I want to finish answering this question. The point is that, unless and until the Prime Minister changes her red lines, it will be impossible to find any space for those negotiations to progress. I do not rule out something dramatic happening next week. The Prime Minister may come to the Dispatch Box and say she now understands that her red lines were the problem and that she is prepared to change them, but I do not think that that will happen. I have concluded that the Prime Minister will plough on with the deal that she put before us last time, and that she is not willing to drop her red lines, which would allow more fruitful progress in those discussions.

I say that without prejudice to the fact that those discussions will go on between now and 12 March. However, the fact that a date is already set for the deal to come back in two weeks’ time makes me just a little cautious in suggesting that those discussions will bear fruit in those next two weeks.

Sir Oliver Letwin: I am very grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way. As he knows, I shall be voting for the Prime Minister’s deal. I think something has changed, which he did not admit at the beginning of his speech: the circumstances of the past 24 hours. I think they may change minds on the Government Benches quite significantly and favourably. But if it does not pass, while I completely agree with him that under those circumstances the Government will need to look again at their red lines to try to get an agreement that is somewhere in the region of what he has been describing, will he also commit that the Labour Front Bench will exercise flexibility? My whole experience of dealing with coalition Government was that it takes two to tango. There has to be flexibility on both sides to get to an agreement.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention. We are playing our part in those discussions with the Government and will continue to do so for as long as is necessary. I do not want to go into what we are discussing, but we will continue to do so as long as is necessary. I am just slightly cautious as to the likelihood that that will lead to a breakthrough in the next 14 days.

Sir William Cash: I must say that the right hon. and learned Gentleman is possibly generating more alarm than he realises. The idea that there is going to be some compromise between the two sides of the House on this question of the red lines raises a very simple question. Would the right hon. and learned Gentleman like to state, on behalf of the Opposition, that they would like to see the repeal of the repeal of the European Communities Act 1972?
Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention, because what it demonstrates is the point I was trying to make about the customs union. If the Government Front Bench say our political declaration is in effect a customs union by a different name, because we are going to build on the backstop and make it permanent and turbocharge it, I suspect there will be a degree of opposition to that, if I have understood anything about the debates that have been going on here for some considerable time. That is where the difference is.

As for the repeal of the 1972 Act, I have always said—I stand by it—that repealing that Act and putting a date for leaving in the withdrawal Act was a mistake because of the transition period. I have always said that the Act we have passed will have to be repealed before it comes into force, and so it will. The implementation Bill White Paper specifically says it is going to be, as the hon. Gentleman well knows. In other words, between now and the end of March we have got to intercept the withdrawal Act that we have passed if there is going to be any order to leaving the EU and ensure that things like the ceasing of the jurisdiction of the European Court is changed. It was barmy to turn the European Court off at 11 o’clock on 29 March, which is the current law, because you cannot get on to transition. I always said that before that comes into force, if this is going to make any sense at all, it is going to have to be changed, intercepted and repealed. That is exactly what the implementation Bill will do. I am as sure as I possibly can be.

Dr Morrison rose—

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con) rose—

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con) rose—

Keir Starmer: I am going to press on. I will just make some progress. I will give way in just a minute. I do not criticise the Minister for the Cabinet Office, because he quite rightly took interventions from a number of Members who really did want detailed answers, but I am going to try to make some progress. Otherwise, between the two of us, we really are going to get to the wind-ups before we anyone else has got in.

Let me move on to closer alignment with the single market. This part of the Brexit debate is too often ignored. How do we protect our service sector, which is of course 80% of our economy and 80% of our jobs? The second part of this package is also needed, alongside a customs union, to prevent a hard border in Northern Ireland. We recognise that if we are going to have closer alignment with the single market we need that to be underpinned by shared institutions and that would require accepting common obligations. What they are would be a matter of negotiation and how we stay aligned would be part of the negotiations. I am not pretending that that would be trouble-free.

The Minister for the Cabinet Office said that that is effectively there in the political declaration, as close as you can get. It is worth going back to the political declaration that the Prime Minister has put before us, because what it actually says is that we should achieve “a level of liberalisation in trade in services well beyond the Parties’ World Trade Organization (WTO) commitments”.

Well, you cannot aim much lower than that. To quote the former UK permanent representative, that is “about as unambitious as it can get.”

The third part of the amendment is “dynamic alignment on rights and protections”.

That means UK standards keeping pace with evolving standards across Europe. Why is that needed? Because we cannot allow UK workers or consumers to see their rights lag behind those in the EU after we leave, or frankly, to allow future Governments to erode those rights. Again, the Minister for the Cabinet Office says, “Well, that is effectively there in the political declaration, or has been promised by the Prime Minister.” There is a world of difference between keeping up with evolving rights and a non-regression clause that simply says they will not drop behind a frozen level, so the answer from the Government simply is not strong enough. They are promising only non-regression—to freeze, not to keep pace. That is a world of difference, and it is no wonder that the trade unions were never going to sign up to that proposal.

Yesterday, the Prime Minister said, “Well, don’t worry. What we’ll do is that every time there is an evolution of rights in Europe, we’ll come back here and see whether this House wants to keep up,” but she did not say, “My Government will vote to do so.” That would make a material difference, but she did not, so neither we nor working people are going to fall for that one.

The fourth and fifth elements are clear “commitments on participation in EU agencies and funding programmes” and an “unambiguous agreement on the detail of future security arrangements, including access to the European Arrest Warrant.”

I do not doubt the Prime Minister’s commitment on this. I worked with her when she was Home Secretary and I know how seriously she takes it, but I also know that the political declaration does not say that there has been any progress towards replica arrangements for the European arrest warrant. With the Prime Minister back in, I think, 2012 or 2013, we looked at what would happen if we fell out of the European arrest warrant arrangements and what the old extradition treaties were, and we were horrified by what we saw. Outside the European arrest warrant, it takes about 10 years to extradite someone from a country such as Italy to this country, and there are real-life examples of that. Using the European arrest warrant, it takes about 40 or 50 days. These are material differences and there is nothing in the political declaration along those lines. I understand the technical problems with Schengen and so on, but one of the barriers has been the determination that the European Court should have no role in anything at all in future, thus blocking progress in this area.

I am not pretending that the plan—the alternative—that we have set out is easy or painless to negotiate. I have never pretended that it will be the easiest negotiation in history, but I know that that kind of deal—delivering a close economic relationship with the EU—would prevent a hard border in Northern Ireland, reduce the pressure on the backstop and could be negotiated. The EU has said as much in recent weeks. We have heard in meetings with EU counterparts and in public that the customs union/single market alignment proposition is credible. The EU has said that it is a promising basis for negotiations, and to quote Michel Barnier:

“If the United Kingdom chooses to let its red lines change...then the European Union would be ready immediately to...respond favourably.”
I think it could be achieved. If the Prime Minister is serious about reaching out to the Opposition, she should engage with that proposal. It is clear from her response to the Leader of the Opposition and her blind insistence on seeking further changes to the backstop that that is not her intention, so today we put that plan to the House and ask for Parliament to help in delivering the basis for a credible Brexit offer.

**Richard Graham:** I have been listening with some interest to the right hon. and learned Gentleman’s explanation of the five bullet points that are so important in the Leader of the Opposition’s amendment, but most of them are fundamentally to do with the future phase of negotiations and are not specifically to do with the withdrawal agreement Bill. I am therefore still puzzled about what the major difference is between his party and the Government and why it cannot agree with the Government to secure the withdrawal agreement and get it through Parliament.

**Keir Starmer:** I think I acknowledged earlier that these points go predominantly to the political declaration and not the withdrawal agreement. Those two documents cannot be separated because they go together. [Interruption.] Well, an example of that is the customs union. The political declaration says that it builds on the withdrawal agreement; we cannot treat them as two separate documents, and the legislation that we will be voting on does not allow us to vote on them separately. But on the general proposition—do we accept that, for example, the backstop, whatever our concerns about it, is inevitable? The answer is yes. I said that when I stood here two weeks ago, and I make that clear again today.

**Dr Murrison:** But the Leader of the Opposition has said that he objects to the backstop because it will not be just permanent; it is potentially forever. Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman have any qualms about that at all? If he does not, he should be supporting the withdrawal agreement, since most of his amendment, especially point 1., is contained within the backstop.

**Keir Starmer:** I tried to deal with that question last time I was at the Dispatch Box, but I will have another go. We do have concerns about the backstop. There are concerns about the exit arrangements. There are concerns that England, Wales and Scotland, on the face of it, will fall out of single market alignment when we are in the backstop. There are concerns about the protection of workplace rights, environmental rights, non-regression protections and so on, and the enforcement mechanism is not the same as it is for other provisions, such as procurement. So there are real, deep concerns. Notwithstanding those concerns, though, we accept, because of our commitment to the Good Friday agreement, that at this stage—two years in, with 30 days to go—a backstop is inevitable. I hope that makes that clear, but I do not accept that it is possible to separate the two documents and treat them as separate documents to be voted on separately. In addition, the legislation does not allow us to do so; it requires both documents to go through in order for us to move forward.

**Mark Pritchard:** Given that Labour party policy on a second referendum was different a week ago from what it is today, may I encourage the right hon. and learned Gentleman to be more optimistic? The Prime Minister could indeed get changes to the backstop—a time limit, or a get-out clause for later on. If she does make those changes—if she is successful—given what the right hon. and learned Gentleman has just said, will he then support the Government in order that we avoid no deal?

**Keir Starmer:** I understand the point and the force with which it is put. Given the conversations that have gone on here and in Brussels, I have to say that I really do not see the prospect that after 94 days of trying, there will be a breakthrough in the next seven days. If there is, we must all come back to the House; there will be a statement from the Prime Minister and we will consider what she says. It will only be on the backstop, and we have accepted the inevitability of the backstop, so it would be more to try to solve a problem on her own Benches than with the Opposition.

However, I have always said that we will look at what the Prime Minister brings back. It was what we did when she brought back the deal in the first place. People invited me to commit beforehand that we would do this, that or the other, but I said I would wait to see what the deal was. I will faithfully wait to see, but at the moment I personally do not think that we shall be standing here in two weeks with significant changes, or any changes, to the withdrawal agreement. I will wait and see. I know that Members on the Government Benches want to be optimistic. My worry is that there is still the expectation of changes that will not happen, and therefore a lack of focus on what needs to happen next. That is why what the Prime Minister said yesterday was significant, because if the deal does not go through, obviously what happens next becomes deeply significant. However, we will faithfully look at whatever comes back and consider it.

A plan of the type that I have suggested is credible. It is a plan that is capable of negotiation, and it is one that the EU is prepared to negotiate. The only question now is, is the Prime Minister prepared to drop her red lines so that there can be a meaningful engagement with that alternative proposition? I invite hon. Members to vote for our amendment tonight, to ensure that that plan can form a consensus or a majority in this House to take us through to the next stage of the process.

I want to underline the commitment that we made on Monday, that if amendment (a) is defeated and the Prime Minister still refuses to negotiate a close economic relationship, Labour will support or table an amendment in favour of a public vote. That public vote would include a credible leave option and remain. It could be attached to the Prime Minister’s deal—what I have called a lock against a damaging Tory Brexit—or it could be attached to any deal that managed to win a majority in the House of Commons.

**Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op)

**Keir Starmer:** I will deal with the earlier intervention. It was put to me earlier that we should not adopt that course because of the social unrest that it might cause. There are a number of answers to that. First, this comes at a stage when we are trying to prevent no deal, and I do not think that no deal is going to be orderly and smooth; I think it is going to lead to huge problems up and down the country. Secondly, I think it is important for us not to exaggerate social disorder, because to do so can encourage social disorder, and I am really worried about that. I am not suggesting for one minute that
that was what the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) was doing—I take her interventions very seriously, as she knows—but I do not think we should casually say that there will be social disorder.

The third thing I want to say is this. I have been in this place for less than four years, but the idea that we would not take the right next step as a matter of principle because we thought that there might be social disorder is a very slippery slope.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree that if a Parliament simply guessed what version or outcome of Brexit people wanted, brought it about and then hoped that it was the right one for the British people, that would not be a pragmatic, sensible, sustainable or democratically acceptable way of proceeding?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for the right hon. Lady’s intervention for two reasons. First, I have been very hard on the Prime Minister, I think justifiably, for the fact that she set out the red lines without any discussion about them in Parliament, or even, I understand, in the Cabinet. It was her almost personal interpretation of the referendum. In my view, many interpretations could have been applied to it, but that was not one of them.

The second reason is important. I am not sure that getting a deal that is not really liked through the House at the last minute is going to settle anything. If, on a sweaty night in March, a measure goes through that no one really likes, the idea that that constitutes closure is very worrying. Of course, we are building up the expectation that if a deal goes through, that will be it, Brexit will be settled and it will all be over. We will still be in the foothills, because all that will happen after that will be the negotiations on the future relationship, which is so thin at the moment.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): May I take up the point about social order? I have faced social disorder in my own constituency and rightly condemned it, however hard that condemnation was for some constituents it hear. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that some in our country on the hard right who are suggesting that there will be social disorder forget that this is the country that faced down Mosley at home and faced down Hitler and Mussolini abroad? We can never give in to hard-right pressure.


Gareth Snell: I too agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). Stoke-on-Trent was the city described by the British National party as the jewel in its crown, and we took no prisoners in fighting its members on the streets to rid ourselves of them.

My right hon. and learned Friend said that there could be a public vote on a deal versus remain at some point in the future. So that I can be clear about our party’s policy, will he outline the nature of the deal that he would like to see on a ballot paper that would persuade him to vote for that deal rather than for remain? It appears to me that at the moment, Labour party policy is actually to revoke article 50 at pretty much any cost.

Keir Starmer: It is important to appreciate that at the moment, I am pressing an amendment that favours a Brexit deal. In our manifesto we said that, if elected, we would seek to negotiate. We said that we would “end Theresa May’s reckless approach to Brexit”, and that we would “scrap the Conservatives’ Brexit White Paper and replace it with fresh negotiating priorities that have a strong emphasis on retaining the benefits of the Single Market and the Customs Union”, and we set out why that was necessary. We also said that we recognised “that leaving the EU with ‘no deal’ is the worst possible deal for Britain”,

and that we would “reject ‘no deal’ as a viable option”.

Pete Wishart: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer: I have not finished answering the question yet.

What I am putting before the House today is entirely consistent with what we said in our manifesto that we would seek to do. Therefore, the question will be whether we can carry that tonight.

Pete Wishart: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer: I have not finished answering the question, and it is an important question.

If that cannot be done, we will be faced in two weeks with what I think will be the Prime Minister’s red-line deal or no deal. In our manifesto we rejected both, and in those circumstances we would either put forward or support a motion on a public vote with a credible leave option—when we tabled a Front-Bench amendment three or four weeks ago we spelled out that that deal or proposition would have to have the confidence of the House—with the other option being remain.

Joanna Cherry: I welcome the Labour party’s movement towards a second referendum. Some people say a second Brexit referendum would be undemocratic, but does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree with Martin Wolf writing in the Financial Times today, who said: “If democracy means anything, it means a country’s right to change its mind”?

Keir Starmer: Yes, and I think that was repeated by the first Brexit Secretary on a number of occasions, although I am never quite sure whether I should quote the first Brexit Secretary—[Interruption.] Yes, or the second, but of course I listen carefully to the third every time, and look forward to seeing him yet again tomorrow morning at the Dispatch Box.

Several hon. Members rose—

Keir Starmer: I am going to make some progress, as I have now been on my feet for 40 minutes.

We are putting forward a credible plan, and we are making it clear that if it is not carried and we are left with the option of the Prime Minister’s deal on her red lines or no deal, then we will put down ourselves or support a motion in favour of a public vote in order to prevent a damaging Tory Brexit.
I had a section in my speech on extending article 50 and the amendment put down by others to that end. I hear what they say about that and commend their efforts to push the Government on this and to get the commitments we got yesterday and again at the Dispatch Box today. It would not have happened without a concerted effort by Members on the Opposition Benches, along with others across the House. It is extremely important that we now know that should the deal not go through on 12 March, there will be a binding vote on no deal—we have already had more than one indication where the will of the House is—and that if that does go through there will be a binding vote on extending article 50. In those circumstances, I urge all Members to support our amendment.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before I call the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), I have now to announce the results of today’s deferred Divisions.

In respect of the question on the draft Official Listing of Securities Prospectus and Transparency (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, the Ayes were 317 and the Noes were 280, so the Ayes have it.

In respect of the question on the draft Employment Rights (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, the Ayes were 317 and the Noes were 260, so the Ayes have it.

In respect of the question on the draft Employment Rights (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, the Ayes were 318 and the Noes were 288, so the Ayes have it.

In respect of the question on the draft Employment Rights (Amendment) (EU Exit) (No. 2) Regulations 2018, the Ayes were 317 and the Noes were 288, so the Ayes have it.

In respect of the question on the draft Employment Rights (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) (EU Exit) (No. 2) Regulations 2018, the Ayes were 317 and the Noes were 260, so the Ayes have it.

Finally—I know the House is ahead of me on all of these matters, and I am merely reminding Members of the prodigious knowledge they possess on these important questions—in respect of the question on draft Financial Services Contracts (Transitional and Saving Provision) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, the Ayes were 318 and the Noes were 281, so the Ayes have it.

[The Division lists are published at the end of today’s debates.]

It will now be a very great relief to the House to hear Dame Caroline Spelman.

4.3 pm

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. To be honest, I was not expecting to be called quite so early in the debate, so I prepared a relatively short speech, having been conditioned by the time limits that have usually pertained in these debates. So I do not expect to detain the House for too long with my observations.

I begin by picking up where the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), speaking for the Opposition, left off. In his final words he acknowledged that something important has changed. Indeed his colleague, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), intervened earlier in the debate to say that the atmosphere is changing, and I think he is right. The pragmatism and courage the Prime Minister showed yesterday in my putative statement is a very important change. I also welcome the Brexit Secretary’s recognition that, when my amendment carried on 29 January, Parliament demonstrated a clear majority against no deal. I listened very carefully to him speaking on the “Today” programme on Radio 4 this morning, when he set out that, if that majority should be restated, and if the meaningful vote did not carry before 12 March, Parliament would have an opportunity to vote on an extension to article 50 the following day. I am pleased to see that the will of Parliament will now be respected.

I absolutely agree with the deputy Prime Minister that the best way to avoid a no-deal Brexit is to vote for a deal. I did just that on 15 January and I will do so again when a deal is next put. I really do appeal to colleagues across the House to do the same. Agreeing a deal would help to ensure an orderly Brexit, which is essential to protect jobs. I have been absolutely consistent on my motivation on this issue, which is to protect the jobs and livelihoods of my constituents and those of my colleagues.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The Prime Minister has indeed repeated ad nauseam the way to avoid no deal is to vote for her deal, but is it not the case that the way to avoid Parliament voting against her deal would have been to talk to Parliament a year ago to find out what kind of a deal would be acceptable to the vast majority of Members of this House?

Dame Caroline Spelman: As an experienced former commercial negotiator—I know that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) is one of those as well—I have learned that, in difficult negotiations of this kind, it is no good harping on about the past. We have to focus on the future and to be relentlessly optimistic and bring good will to the table.

Getting back to the subject that is closest to my heart, I sounded the alarm months ago about the risks to the car industry of a no-deal Brexit. Many workers in my constituency have already lost their jobs, and more recently we heard the sad news about Nissan and Honda. The loss of jobs is devastating, but far more will be risked if auto manufacturers leave these shores. The chairman of Unipart, John Neill, said in the weekend Financial Times: “If we lose the automotive industry, we lose one of the most powerful drivers of productivity and a powerful source of industrial innovation”.

The UK is now the ninth biggest manufacturing country in the world and we just cannot afford to lose this critical industry.

A no-deal Brexit threatens not only our car makers. Last night, representatives from the CBI, Next, Bosch, Ford, the TUC, Make UK—formerly the EEF—the Food and Drink Federation, the Investment Association and Virgin Media, to name but a few, spoke to a large number of MPs at an event in Parliament. All those organisations fear the chaos of a no-deal Brexit and implored parliamentarians to come together and agree a deal. Those colleagues who think that leaving without a deal is in the national interest must answer the concerns of the industries that millions of jobs depend on.
Chris Cummings, chief executive of the Investment Association, which represents firms collectively managing around £7 trillion, told MPs last night that £19 billion had left the United Kingdom since the referendum. The Investment Association can measure that, because it involves its members. The current run rate of this capital flight is approximately £2.4 billion each month, so the notion that no deal has already been priced into the markets is simply not true. The full consequences have not yet been accounted for.

The human cost of no deal is not just jobs and livelihoods today, which are very important, especially in constituencies such as mine; it will also impact the value of people’s pensions and savings in the future. Having touched on pensions, I want to make a point that is relevant to amendment (b), which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said that the Government will accept. Colleagues might recall that I have also sounded the alarm about the plight of UK pensioners living in other EU countries, and especially about the provisions for their healthcare. If the United Kingdom were to leave the EU without a deal, there are at present no provisions in place to ensure that their healthcare would be paid for. Given the size of the contingency fund of taxpayers’ money that the Government have had to make available for the risk of a no-deal Brexit, I suggest to my right hon. Friends that some portion of that could be used to bridge the gap for UK citizens in Italy, Germany, France and Spain who are already receiving letters from the authorities warning them that their healthcare costs will not be covered from 29 March. That is a source of real anxiety and human cost to the people concerned.

Businesses cautiously welcomed the Prime Minister’s announcement yesterday, which has the capacity to take away the threat of no deal on 29 March, and the director of the CBI described it as a “glimpse of sanity”. She called on the Government to permanently rule out no deal to provide the certainty that business needs. That would de-risk the situation and create the space to secure a pragmatic deal. People often confuse risk with uncertainty, because a binary choice between a deal or no deal with 15 days to go is a high-risk situation, which creates uncertainty. The Prime Minister’s pragmatic response yesterday helped to reduce that risk and creates the space to secure a deal.

The contingency planning for no deal has already cost business millions and the taxpayer billions. Pfizer alone has spent £90 million on no-deal preparations, and that money cannot then be invested or directed to the frontline, so jobs will be lost in the end. The Federation of Small Businesses reports that 85% of its members are not ready for no deal and, as somebody mentioned earlier, very small businesses do not have the capacity to prepare for a no-deal scenario in the same way as some larger ones can.

Last night’s publication of the Government’s assessment of the state of preparedness for no deal did not provide a lot of reassurance on that, so it is time to be pragmatic—the Prime Minister has taken a lead on that—and to deliver an orderly Brexit. We need to come together across parties to try to get a deal over the line. If we cannot do that, we will fail the nation.

If MPs cannot bring themselves to put the national interest first at a time like this, they should consider the risks we face to security, freight delays, air traffic control, news, food, medicine and energy shortages, healthcare for UK citizens in the EU, scientific research and educational exchange. We have heard more and more about those things, and all that disruption is having and will have an impact on the people whom we represent. As demonstrated on 29 January, there is a clear majority to rule out no deal, and I expect that that majority will increase at the next opportunity. However, we cannot just stand against something; we must urgently build a consensus for a deal that we stand up for in the British national interest.

It is clear that businesses need a deal to deliver frictionless trade and customs co-operation. Are the parties really so far apart on some form of customs partnership? The 2017 Conservative party manifesto mentioned having a special relationship based on a customs arrangement, and the official Opposition are calling for a customs union, so I feel that we are within touching distance if there is a determined effort to reach a consensus.

Lady Hermon: I would be delighted to hear the right hon. Lady encourage those on the Front Bench to confirm that she and her right hon. and hon. Friends will be allowed a free vote in the event that the Prime Minister again does not win the meaningful vote if we have one before the middle of March. Will the Conservative Government allow Conservative Members to have a free vote in the event of a significant decision about taking no deal off the table?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I cannot commit the Government to that, but it is clear to the House that these are not normal political times. I do not envy the job of my party’s Chief Whip, which must be one of the most difficult jobs on the planet at the moment. The main parties have difficulty in operating as we normally would, and much of what has been achieved has been achieved by building cross-party alliances. I think the public feel reassured when they see that happen, leastways my constituents and members of my party have told me that they like to see us working together in the national interest to try to bring about a resolution to this process, because we need it sooner rather than later.

With good will and determination, I believe we can get there and secure the new relationship with Europe for which people voted. I believe we will enjoy trading on preferential terms with our largest market, while being outside the constraints of the EU institutions to which many object today. That is what more than 17 million people voted for, and that reality is now within our grasp.

Whether Brexit is delivered on 29 March or is delayed for a few months—I am no great fan of an extended delay, as delay means uncertainty and will cost businesses money—it is up to us to back a deal that delivers certainty and protects prosperity and work. I therefore urge colleagues from all parties carefully to consider the amendments before the House today. More than that, as the debate continues in this place, we must now work more closely together than ever before to deliver Brexit.

Several hon. Members rose—
Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins), who speaks for the Scottish National party, now has a possibly unrivalled opportunity to demonstrate, by comparison with his Front-Bench colleagues, just how brief he can be.

Stephen Gethins: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Here we are for yet another debate and yet more votes as the clock ticks towards leaving the European Union on 29 March, and towards a no-deal Brexit and a cliff edge that everyone knows will be disastrous and damaging. From day one, this has been a lesson in gross irresponsibility, particularly from the Government.

Our amendment (k) is simple and straightforward: it would take no deal off the table altogether. The Prime Minister was uncharacteristically clear in her statement yesterday when she said we will have a vote on 13 March to take no deal off the table for the end of March. Our amendment simply goes one step further.

We know from public statements and from what we hear—Ministers will be well aware of this—that even members of the Cabinet and officials are warning of the devastation that no deal would bring. Everybody knows. This is not a negotiating tactic; it is simply a tactic to hold a fracturing Conservative party together. We have a Government in peacetime who we know are preparing for medicine shortages and food shortages, and who we know have discussed martial law and civil unrest. That is deeply disconcerting to everyone, and it underlines why no deal must be taken off the table.

Our amendment is not just something that the Scottish National party is calling for, and I am grateful to colleagues from the Green party, Plaid Cymru and the Liberal Democrats for backing it. I know that colleagues from the Labour party and the Conservative party are calling for it, too, including the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) in the previous speech. We must take no deal off the table altogether, which is why this is such a simple amendment.

Dame Caroline Spelman: I should have made it clear to the House that, having been reassured by what the Minister said today and by the consistency with which he has conducted himself, with a common decency such as Lord Duncan of Springbank about how valuable they thought it was working for him. I hope I have not damaged his future political prospects too much by laying that, but I remain the decency of what he is trying to do, his own personal situation and the bravery of what he has done today.

What I find incredibly striking is that we have a Government where collective responsibility is breaking down, where a Prime Minister remarks that she does not want a Cabinet full of yes-men because she cannot get collective responsibility and where Ministers have been able to say whatever they like, regardless of what Government policy is, yet you end up sacking a member of Government for agreeing with you. What kind of situation are we in? This is an extraordinary set of circumstances in which the Prime Minister fails to sack Cabinet members for disagreeing with her publicly but sacks a member of the Government whom she has agreed with, whom the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster agreed with at the Dispatch Box, although he is not in his place at the moment, and whom the Home Secretary found himself in agreement with this morning. That is an extraordinary state of affairs. Do not worry; I am sure that the hon. Member for South Leicestershire will return to disagreeing with us on other occasions, but I salute what he has done today and the way in which he has conducted himself, with a common decency that we too rarely see in this Brexit debate.

We get told about “Project Fear”, but it is not that when it is a matter of fact. One in three businesses is planning to relocate some of its operations and one in 10 has done so. The UK is seen as a bad choice for investment. The global chief investment officer at UBS Wealth Management has said:

“The consensus among those investors is that the UK is uninvestable at this point”.

That is not good for anybody. We also have a decline in our public services, where we are seeing a dramatic decline of 87% in the number of applications from European economic area nationals for UK registration, according to the Nursing and Midwifery Council. That is a crucial public service, where EU nationals fill gaps in the workplace to provide it. So much damage is being done by this threat of a no-deal. Our amendment is a simple one and I hope that Members will back it, because it is straightforward and it will help to take this away.

Stephen Gethins: I thank the right hon. Lady for that clarification. The amendment standing in my name and that of my colleagues will be pressed to a vote, because we think that as the clock ticks we cannot wait for another two weeks. We have been waiting for “another couple of weeks” or for “another few days” for months and years now. This House needs to take a bit of responsibility for the situation in which we have been left, for which posterity and history will judge us.

Stephen Gethins: I find that this is the extraordinary thing. The hon. Gentleman knows I have huge respect for him—he and I served on the Foreign Affairs Committee together—but he is telling us that we cannot trust the Government’s figures. Who can we trust any more if we cannot trust his own Government? Who can we trust when we are trying to make judgments about the future? We know that this is having a real impact, and I am going to come on to deal with some of this shortly.
[Stephen Gethins]

We are almost three years on from the EU referendum and I am not entirely sure why we are doing this at the moment. I have just been reading that, apparently, Poundland is going to be doing burgundy and blue passport covers, and we could all have a choice—they will be a pound a go. Perhaps if the Government decide to buy one for everybody in the UK, we can all have our own choice and it will save us a lot of hassle and be a lot cheaper than crashing out of the European Union.

Let us not lose sight of the gross irresponsibility that has led us to this point. We have a minority Government who are failing to be a minority Government. Other European legislatures manage it, and the Scottish Government manage it. It is not always easy; it is difficult—

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): And the Welsh Government.

Stephen Gethins: The Welsh Government do it. A minority Government must speak to the other parties and engage with the Opposition. We have a Government who are trying to run the show as if they have a majority of 100; for their information, they do not. They lost their majority at the last general election. We did not lose our majority at the last general election, but the Government did.

Let us not lose sight of where we are. It was the charlatans and chancers who backed vote leave on a blank piece of paper. They did not have the decency, courtesy or democratic accountability to put down what vote leave meant, and the Secretary of State was one of them. That is why we are in the mess that we are in today. It is a mess entirely of the Secretary of State and his colleagues' own making, and one for which not only the Government did.

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Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): And the Labour Benches.

Stephen Gethins: The Welsh Government do it. A minority Government must speak to the other parties and engage with the Opposition. We have a Government who are trying to run the show as if they have a majority of 100; for their information, they do not. They lost their majority at the last general election. We did not lose our majority at the last general election, but the Government did.

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Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): And the Treasury, and the Government will not give them to MPs in this House.

Stephen Gethins: It has been extraordinary. As usual, my hon. Friend makes an excellent point about how the Government have tried to take powers away. They have tried to take votes from us and they have tried to take away our ability to hold them to account in a way that they just could not get away with in the European institutions, whether they like it or not.

On the lack of planning and that vote leave on a blank piece of paper, I think Donald Tusk was being restrained when he said that there is a special place in hell for those who backed Brexit without a clue about how to get there. For all those snowflakes who feigned outrage about his remarks, this is a man who fought the communists—he was living under a Soviet vassal state at that point, unlike others—and who stood up for and was arrested for his beliefs, yet when he points out the blindingly obvious, he gets dragged over the coals for it. What outrage. It was faux outrage.

Richard Graham: And the SNP.

Stephen Gethins: I will give way if the hon. Gentleman can possibly justify it.

Richard Graham: I honestly do not think that Slovenia has anything to do with today’s discussion of the withdrawal agreement. The amendment proposed by the SNP, which is what the hon. Gentleman should be referring to, talks about this House being “determined not to leave the European Union without a withdrawal agreement”, so will he confirm that the SNP will support the Government deal, which will be on the table before 12 March?

Stephen Gethins: It is extraordinary: I have not even mentioned Slovenia yet, but the hon. Gentleman knows the reference I am making. I know he is a decent Member and has served his country well in the diplomatic service, and I know he will have been embarrassed by the Foreign Secretary’s recent remarks. I want to talk about—[Interruption.] I am a Front-Bench speaker. I want to talk about the UK’s standing in the world of which we are still a part for the time being.

There are those who are quite content to compare the EU with the USSR and cannot handle these remarks from Donald Tusk. Just at the point when we need friends and influence around the world—as the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), who works so hard on these things, knows full well—we are losing them. Let us look at some of the reactions to that. Carl Bildt, the former Swedish Prime Minister, said that Britain used to be a nation “providing leadership to the world. Now it can’t even provide leadership to itself.”

Lattia’s ambassador to London said: “Soviets killed, deported, exiled and imprisoned hundreds of thousands of Latvia’s inhabitants after the illegal occupation in 1940, and ruined lives of three generations, while the EU has brought prosperity, equality, growth, and respect.”

Alison Thewlis (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a good point about democratic accountability. I have been serving on the Committees for countless financial services statutory instruments that will take powers and give them to the Financial Conduct Authority, the Prudential Regulation Authority and the Treasury, and the Government will not give them to MPs in this House.
I ask Members to please reflect on what our closest friends and allies are telling us. Asked to respond to Hunt’s remarks when he compared the EU with the Soviet Union, the European Commission’s chief spokesman, said:

“I say respectfully that we would all benefit, in particular foreign affairs ministers, from opening a history book from time to time.”

The Foreign Secretary clearly did not listen. He doubled down when he went to Slovenia and referred to it as a “Soviet vassal state” to which the former Speaker of the Slovenian Parliament said:

“The British foreign minister comes to Slovenia asking us for a favour while arrogantly insulting us.”

At a time of crisis, the greatest crisis that the UK has faced since the second world war, we are led by political pygmies who do not understand the history of those countries that are closest to us, never mind the history of the nations of these islands. They have turned the UK into the political basket case of Europe. There is utter astonishment and bewilderment in Brussels and elsewhere at the UK’s decline. There is also astonishment in Scotland at what is going on down here, even by those who, unlike me, backed the Union.

The right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) was right to raise a point of order last night and I listened to it carefully. I am glad that, because of her work, we got the no-deal papers released, and I thank her for it. It has to be said that the document was pretty flimsy, a very small document. There is much more to the Scottish Government’s document. Their analysis, which they were happy to publish a long time ago, shows that any form of Brexit will be damaging to Scotland’s economy. The deal will be damaging to Scotland’s economy, which is why we cannot vote for it, but a no-deal Brexit could result in a recession worse than that in 2008, causing Scotland’s GDP to fall by up to 7%, and unemployment to rise by around 100,000.

**Anna Soubry rose—**

**Stephen Gethins:** I will give way to the right hon. Lady as I have made reference to her.

**Anna Soubry:** The point that everybody in this House needs to understand is that, on Privy Council terms, I saw the entirety of the most recent documents that members of this Government’s Cabinet and the important sub-Committee had seen. I saw a large number of those documents, the contents of which make it clear, in the words of the Business Secretary, that a no deal would be ruinous. Last night, I attributed those words to the Brexit Secretary who was very keen for me to set the record straight. I would have liked him to have adopted that view, but it was the Business Secretary who described no deal as ruinous. Notwithstanding that clear information, which was available to the most senior members of this Government, they refuse to take no deal off the table. I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that that is the disgrace. The Government know what a no deal would do to this country, and they refuse point blank to take it off the table.

**Stephen Gethins:** As usual, the right hon. Lady makes a powerful and valid point. As this is the first time I have been able to say this, might I also say that it is nice to hear her speaking so much more closely to me now?

**Anna Soubry:** You might regret it.

**Stephen Gethins:** The right hon. Lady is right, I might regret it. As so often, she makes a powerful point. That is why our amendment today—I hope she will support it—is a very simple one that will take no deal off the table. The Cabinet knows how damaging it will be; business knows how damaging it will be. These papers are there. They have been seen, as the right hon. Lady correctly points out. On top of that, the Scottish Government analysis shows that EU structural funds are worth €941 million to Scotland across the EU budget period, and we do not know what happens next. That is almost £1 billion and we do not know what happens.

There are 4,500 EU national staff facing uncertainty in Scottish universities, and I see that daily in my constituency work. A letter from 150 universities says that “leaving the EU without a deal is one of the biggest threats our universities have ever faced”. The University of St Andrews, which signed that letter, has been around for more than 600 years, so it has a bit of context; it knows a thing or two.

Do you know what stings? Scotland never voted for this. We were the first to suggest an extension, as common sense. The Scottish Government were the first to propose a compromise, to which the UK Government did not really have the decency to respond. And here we are proposing to reach out and work with the Government to take no deal off the table as well. We did not vote for this process but we have to engage with it, and we have engaged with it. I pay tribute to our friends and colleagues from different parties who have worked with us, because this is the right thing to do.

The Scottish food and drink industry thinks that we will lose £2 billion in sales annually. This does not affect the hedge fund managers or those who have pushed money offshore. It affects the poorest and most vulnerable, as well as small businesses, and it has an impact on unemployment in some of the areas of the United Kingdom that can least afford it.

I hear people saying about the EU as a political union, “Why would you want to be a member of the UK in the EU?” Well, you know what? The EU listens. We are in a partnership of equals in the EU; it cannot force us to do things. We have a Court of Justice, a Parliament and a Council of Ministers—the UK has none of them. The EU is a club for independent, growing and thriving member states. There is no place for independence or a partnership of equals within the United Kingdom.

Our amendment is a simple and straightforward cross-party proposal that rules out no deal all together. Yes, we want to take things out of the hands of the Prime Minister, but we also want her to commit to this because I am sorry to say that, with her twists and turns, it has become increasingly difficult to trust anything the Prime Minister says. Four weeks away from leaving, our amendment seems to be a responsible course of action, as there are so many pieces of legislation still to be passed.

I have raised many points, but I now address the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron). We have put £4.2 billion into no-deal preparation. Just think what we could have done with that £4.2 billion at
[Stephen Gethins]

a time of continued Westminster austerity, when our public services are crying out for it and when we should be tackling climate change, poverty and many other challenges. Continuing with no deal is irresponsible, irrational and—I appeal to some of the Tories—very, very expensive. I hope that all Members will join us in backing our cross-party amendment.

Mr Speaker: A five-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches now applies, although I warn colleagues that that limit will probably have to fall; it is not compulsory to speak to the full limit.

4.37 pm

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I will try to abide by your instructions, Mr Speaker; thank you for calling me so early.

It is customary to say what a pleasure it is to follow the previous speaker, but I must suggest to my friend, the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins), that the SNP continually talks down the United Kingdom to such an extent that most people in Scotland do not even listen any more. SNP Members would do well to reflect on this. I gently suggest to the hon. Gentleman that he may be very critical of the UK at the moment—of how the Government conduct themselves and our parliamentary democracy—but we can be proud of the fact that this robust democracy is accommodating a very robust debate. In France, the Government can increase the fuel tax and there are people dead in the streets of Paris. In America, there has not been a Government for months. This is an important debate and there are differences across the House, but we can be proud of our parliamentary democracy in actually accommodating that debate.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: As the hon. Gentleman is busy lecturing Scots and Scotland, I hope he will reflect on this point—that in Scotland today the EU is far too busy lecturing Scots and Scotland, I hope he will reflect on this. I gently suggest to the hon. Gentleman that he may be very critical of the UK at the moment—of how the Government conduct themselves and our parliamentary democracy—but we can be proud of the fact that this robust democracy is accommodating a very robust debate. In France, the Government can increase the fuel tax and there are people dead in the streets of Paris. In America, there has not been a Government for months. This is an important debate and there are differences across the House, but we can be proud of our parliamentary democracy in actually accommodating that debate.

Mr Baron: I actually think that is quite questionable given the SNP’s recent election results and how badly it is doing—

Joanna Cherry rose—

Mr Baron: Just wait a minute—sit down. I have taken one intervention. We should look at how badly the SNP is doing in terms of representing the interests of the EU, as it were, with regard to election results.

Let me put the SNP to one side for a second and suggest to my fellow fusilier, the Secretary of State, that, as a leaver, I also accept that there is a need for compromise with regard to the withdrawal agreement. One cannot, after 45 years of integration, move from imperfection to perfection in one bound; there has to be compromise on both sides. That is why, while I have trouble with the transition period—there are many aspects that I do not like—at least it is definite. It is no worse than being in the EU—nobody underestimates that. SNP Members have a problem with is the fact that the backstop is indefinite as it is presently constituted. I urge him to ensure that we have a meaningful change to the backstop to address the fact that at the moment we could be locked in an indefinite backstop that only the EU could free us from. No sensible person would enter into a relationship of that sort—it is madness.

When I say “meaningful” change, I mean that it has to have equal standing with the backstop, or the bit that we are changing. The Northern Ireland protocol containing the backstop is an appendix, so there is scope for a further appendix putting this right. It would be face-saving for the EU, if the agreement itself had not been changed. We could put a meaningful appendix into it. I suggest that the Government give that some thought, because it could assuage the concerns of a lot of Conservative Members with regard to the withdrawal agreement. Instead of worrying about where any additional text would go, agreement about the text itself could first being sought. That could be very helpful, because an awful lot of time could be wasted in trying to agree where that text goes before the text itself has been agreed.

That is something for the Secretary of State to think about. I wish him and his team well—genuinely so. I have expressed concern that the Prime Minister’s next steps, as outlined yesterday, may, at the margin, make a good deal less likely because the EU could perhaps hope that Parliament does its work for it by taking no deal off the table and by extending article 50. However, I still wish him well, because it is still within our grasp to achieve a withdrawal agreement that could bring us all together—certainly those of us on the Opposition Benches, and a number of hon. Members on the Conservative Benches—to get this agreement through.

Let me quickly turn to the Labour party’s policy on a second referendum, because that has not been touched on in this debate so far, but it is absolutely scandalous. Labour said that it would respect the wishes of the referendum, and now it is offering a second referendum. In one way, that is good, because it is clear blue water between the Conservative party and the Labour party. However, I would just offer these thoughts to the Labour party with regard to its recent assurances that it is going to offer a second referendum. First, it is a condescending policy—it is saying that people did not understand what they were voting for.

Peter Grant: Two days ago, the hon. Gentleman told this House that the United Kingdom already trades on WTO terms with everybody outside the European Union, and the Prime Minister had to correct him. If somebody who led the campaign to have an EU referendum still does not know about the trade deals that we have as part of the EU, what chance have the other 60 million people in these islands got?

Mr Baron: I am afraid the hon. Gentleman misheard me. I said that we trade with the majority of the world outside the EU on WTO terms—that is a fact—and we trade very profitably with them. That is the issue. While it is clear that most of us would prefer a good deal to no deal, the exaggeration of how bad WTO terms are has to be set in context.

Peter Grant rose—

Mr Baron: I am sorry, but I am going to finish because I do not think that a third intervention will add anything to my time, to be perfectly honest.
The Labour party policy on a second referendum is condescending because it says that people did not know what they voted for the first time round. The predictions of doom and gloom from the establishment in this country—the Bank of England, the International Monetary Fund, the Government and leaflets through the door—and of 500,000 more people unemployed by December 2016 if we voted leave were so badly wrong that most of those public bodies had to apologise.

The policy is condescending, but it is also contradictory, because it suggests that people might not have understood it last time but will understand it this time. Why would they understand it this time if we do not have faith in them to understand it the first time? Why not then have a third or fourth referendum? Finally, it is dangerous, because we made a clear pledge that we would respect that referendum result. I thank the Labour party for its policy, but it is wrong.

4.45 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): We need to begin by acknowledging that we have made a little bit of progress. Yesterday the Prime Minister finally acknowledged that there is no support in the House of Commons for leaving with no deal. It was interesting that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster was in most difficulty in his contribution when he was trying to avoid answering questions about how the Government will vote if we get to that point. I will make a prediction to ease his pain: if we do get to that point, I think the Government will vote against us leaving with no deal. How could they do anything other than that given the document released yesterday, which predicts £13 billion of cost to British businesses? For what? To fill in customs declarations, with no benefit to their trade whatsoever. It also predicts rising food prices and delays at the ports. At the moment, French customs officials say, “Go on, go on,” but the moment they put their hands up and say, “Arrêtez”—“Stop”—the chaos will begin.

At the industrial coalition meeting to which the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) referred, the most striking moment for those of us who were there was when representatives of two major parts of manufacturing industry said simply, “If there’s a no-deal Brexit, it will be catastrophic for us.” The thing I always find it hard to understand is why people who do not run things and make things for a living think they know better about the consequences of a no-deal Brexit than people who do.

The other truth that has finally hit home—I hope the Government understand it—is that we do not know what the future will look like, and therefore we are not prepared to take this enormous step of leaving the European Union on the basis of a prospectus that is completely vague and uncertain. How do we answer that question? We negotiate the future partnership.

Mr McFadden: On the point about the purpose of an extension, what does my right hon. Friend think of President Macron saying that there is no way the EU would accept an extension without a “clear objective”? In his view, what should that clear objective be?

Hilary Benn: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is a challenge the House will face the moment it has voted for an extension, because I am sure that is what the European Union will say to us.

I am setting out what I think are the three alternatives that would be available to the House at that point. The first requires agreement. I do not think the Prime Minister is prepared to give that; that is what the evidence shows. The second would require the European Union to change its approach to the negotiations completely. It would be the sensible thing to do, but the EU may not agree. The third—the one we will be left with if we cannot agree—will be to go back to the people and ask them what they think.

I simply want to say that I welcome the decision that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition announced on Monday. It cannot have been an easy decision to make, and I do not at all underestimate the difficulties of holding a second referendum. However, it would in those circumstances answer the question from the European Union about what the extension is for. When it comes to the question in such a referendum, to me it is clear: the only deal that has been negotiated to date—the Prime Minister’s—even though it would have been rejected by Parliament, and the alternative of remain, because there is not an alternative leave on the table. Let me say to those who might want to jump up and say, “What about no deal?”: first, if we go back to the referendum of 2016, nobody on the leave side argued for leaving with no deal—nobody; secondly, we know how damaging it would be; and, thirdly, why should an option that was never before the British people in 2016 suddenly appear on a ballot paper in 2019, if we have a referendum?

Mr Grieve: I am sorry to bang on about this, but we are a rule-of-law state and it is an unlawful question to put. If a Government choose to put no deal on a
referendum ballot paper, they are in effect saying that they will not respect and have decided as a matter of a policy not to observe their international obligations.

Hilary Benn: The right hon. and learned Gentleman very forcefully makes one of the arguments for why no deal is not an option in every sense of the word.

In conclusion, we are in a marginally better position than we were when we had the last of these debates, because the Government have been forced to face reality. I pay tribute to Ministers who, we are told, in a series of delegations to the Prime Minister, made her realise that she would not be able to defeat the amendments today if she did not make a concession yesterday.

However, we are still in a very perilous position for the country. I have no doubt at all about our ability to prosper, but our future prosperity depends on the decisions that we choose to make. It is not automatic, as the Brexit disaster is proving. That is why I echo the view of others who have said that those who argued for leave bear a very heavy responsibility for the crisis the country is now in. Parliament’s job is to make sure that, when that moment comes, if the deal is defeated again, we are ready to make a choice about what we are for. The tragedy of Brexit is that the Government have been completely incapable of making those choices. It is Parliament’s responsibility to step up and take those decisions if the Government continue to fail to do so.

4.53 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): To reply immediately to the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), it is not actually the duty of this House to surrender parliamentary government to government by Parliament. In fact, that is well established in our constitutional arrangements. Furthermore, any attempt by shenanigans to rearrange the procedures to give private Members’ Bills an advantage over Government business is itself reprehensible for that very good reason.

I want to turn to another question, which is to do with the issue of control over laws. I think it is very important for every Member of this House to ask themselves whether they would be prepared to tell their constituents that, under article 4 of the withdrawal agreement, we would be expected—in fact, we would be required by an Act of Parliament—to surrender control over our laws. If people have not had the time or perhaps the opportunity to read article 4, may I suggest that they do so? To do otherwise would be utterly and completely irresponsible.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. If we do not have control of our laws, we do not have control of our country. Is that not right?

Sir William Cash: That is completely right. That is what we are here for. We are not here to voice our own opinions or to fragment into factions and then impose views on others by virtue of deals done across the Floor of the House. We are elected on manifesto commitments, and we have an obligation to our constituents to make laws in their interests, not in ours. I therefore suggest that looking at article 4 is extremely important. I accept that it is said that the article would apply only during the implementation period, but that in itself would put us at the mercy of our competitors.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): It is worse than that, because it would apply not only during the implementation period but during the whole period of the backstop, which is potentially unlimited. The European Court of Justice would therefore remain—against our manifesto commitment—the supreme arbiter of our laws in that area.

Sir William Cash: I am so glad that my hon. Friend has made that point, because I was about to make it myself and now will not have to. I am as much against the backstop as I am against the article 4 arrangements, for reasons that both of us agree on.

We have to grapple with the fact that article 4 will apply across all the EU treaties, laws and legal positions adopted by the ECJ over recent years. It is inconceivable that the House would hollow itself out in such a manner as to preclude itself from being able to control such things. I am Chairman of the European Scrutiny Committee, and we get these regulations and directives week in, week out. We received one last week that intends to turn the veto procedure—or unanimity rule—over the making of national tax policy into qualified majority voting. If people really think that that is a minor matter, let them think again what effect it would have on their constituents.

Under article 4, our country would be reduced, as I said in my intervention on the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, to an undemocratic subjugation to the decisions of 27 other member states. In fact, not only that, but as I said, it would put us at the mercy of our competitors. In addition, the article would have the same effect with regard to the question of state aid during the backstop.

I do not think that the businesses that argued so strongly for this transitional period had any idea that this would be the consequence of the withdrawal agreement. That agreement emerged from the Chequers deal, which itself was an overturning of the withdrawal Act that we passed in June 2018 and had been planned long before that Act was given Royal Assent, without any reference to the Cabinet and in defiance of collective Cabinet responsibility.

If we do not control these laws, who will? It will be the 27 member states. In an important book, “Berlin Rules”, by our former ambassador to Germany, Sir Paul Lever, he says that before decisions are taken by European member states, or indeed by the Council of Ministers, they are cleared with Germany. He also says that it is a German Europe. He does not mince his words.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I wonder if the hon. Gentleman is aware of the utter irony of this situation. He moans and complains and raises grievances about Europe—he has a chip on his shoulder—but the reality for Scotland in the United Kingdom is worse than everything he says. We have a party in charge that we have not voted for in 65 years. The European Union is nowhere near as bad as what he is going on about.

Sir William Cash: I do not concede what the hon. Gentleman says for one very good reason: it is part of the United Kingdom.
That is my first point on control over laws. Article 4 is so offensive because it hollows out this House and hollows out our democracy. On that basis alone, one should not vote for the withdrawal agreement.

As I said in my exchanges with the shadow Secretary of State, I want to know why anyone would want to undermine the repeal of the European Communities Act 1972, which is the law of the land and is contained in section 1 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act itself. I would also like people to be honest enough—those who wish to rejoin the European Union, including my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve)—to say why on earth anyone would want to rejoin the European Union when it is in complete and total implosion. People are voting with their feet in so many countries, including in Italy.

In a nutshell, the withdrawal agreement is deeply, deeply flawed and we ought to vote against it. I believe that the decision at the moment—as I understand it, it has not been concluded—is that the amendments are going to be withdrawn, but I look forward to hearing from the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper).

Mr Speaker: We are quite extraordinarily grateful to the Chair of the European Scrutiny Committee.

5.1 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): As I follow the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), I would just point out to him that I am not convinced other European countries are looking at us with any kind of envy at the moment, given the confusion and chaos we seem to be in. I will want to move amendment (f), and I will also speak to amendments (a), (b) and (c).

We are back here again at our usual fortnightly gathering in which nothing has changed. The only thing that has changed in our family, Mr Speaker, is that Ed is currently halfway up Kilimanjaro with Little Mix, Danny Dyer and Shirley Ballas for Comic Relief. That has cued a whole series of bad jokes about which is harder: climbing an extremely high mountain or trying to get anybody to agree anything on Brexit. I fear his mountain climbing will be considerably shorter than our repeated debates.

I would like to deal with the amendments first before, if I have time, addressing the wider issue. The Government have changed their position on the next steps if there is no deal or an extension of article 50. I would just like to have that confirmation.

Yvette Cooper: That is hugely important. I will finish these quick points and then come on to that. I would like confirmation, too—like my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central—that the motions will be amendable. There is also the key issue about what happens if there is a disagreement. Let us suppose that there is a disagreement between the EU and the UK, perhaps with one side suggesting three months and one suggesting two months. In those circumstances, we need the reassurance that the Government will not shrug their shoulders and say, “Okay, we didn’t get an agreement. We are now just going to pursue no deal after all,” and that instead they will come back to this House and allow for some process of resolution, if there is a disagreement.

I really urge Ministers to say how the Government would vote. We will keep our Bill in reserve. We hope that, with these assurances, we do not need to press amendment (c). I hope to press amendment (f) and that we can have confirmation and clarity of what the Prime Minister said as part of the motion, but it is also important for the Government to provide clarity about how they would vote. Businesses still do not know exactly whether there is going to be a majority or not. We can give them some assurances about how people have voted in the past, but the thing they really want to hear is what Government would do in those circumstances. Will Government, faced with that choice, really want to say, “We actually want to cause huge problems for medicine supplies for the NHS, huge problems for the short-life radioisotopes that are used for cancer treatment, huge problems for our manufacturing industry and to turn motorways into car parks?” Will the Government really, honestly, want to do that, rather than just saying, “D’you know what? We might need a bit more time.”
Sir William Cash: Let me ask the right hon. Lady a question, as she is taking such a prominent part in this debate. It is the same question that I have put to several people today: would she countenance the idea, on behalf of trade unionists and workers who, for example, worked in the ports and were completely against the ports of trade unionists and workers who, for example, worked today: would she countenance the idea, on behalf of a customs union. I think that, if Ministers were honest about being able to reach out and trying to build some consensus around something, they would recognise that if many of the points that are in amendment (a) were put to a free vote across the House, they would—I suspect—get a majority and that that would be a consensus way forward.

I also want to deal with my concerns about the tone of the debate. The right hon. Member for Meriden said earlier that she hoped that the tone of the debate was changing and that there would be some spirit of compromise. I look forward to that, but I am worried that I have still, even today, heard comments from Members of this House about the agreement that the Prime Minister came to yesterday, accusing those of us who have been calling for it of being “mutinous”, “plotters”, “saboteurs” and “blackmailers”. I think that this is really inappropriate, divisive and counter-productive.

It really does not fit with the kind of debate that we ought to be having about something so important, particularly when, frankly, I think it is hugely patriotic to be trying to make sure that we can stand up for British families across the country do not have to pay higher food prices in shops. I say as a final thought that, in the end, wherever we get to in this Brexit process has to have some form of consensus around it, or it will not be sustainable, and that is what we should all keep in mind.

5.9 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), whom I respect enormously. She always speaks in a measured tone. I take her point about the language and how we have to be very careful in this place about how we address one another. We should also speak outside in measured tones to ensure that we try to get the best deal that we possibly can.

Before I start, I just say that I have been accused, often by my own side, of being a zealot, a right-winger, and all these things. I am not. Let me repeat: I and my hon. Friends are MPs who want the best deal we can get for our country. None of us wants to leave the EU without a deal—not one, contrary to popular opinion. We accept that to leave with a deal is the best option we can possibly get. But we have to ask ourselves, how do we get to that point?

We had a vote in June 2016, and that referendum result was clear. The instruction to everyone in this House was to leave the EU—not half in, half out, a bit here, a bit there. The instruction was clear: to leave the EU. We had two years—two long years—to negotiate a deal, and we are now where we are. I would not be, and never would presume to be, Prime Minister, but had I been—and I do not just speak with hindsight—then when article 50 was invoked I would have instructed my Ministers to prepare for no deal immediately, and to publicise to the public exactly what they were doing, while at the same time trying to strike a deal with the EU.

Sir William Cash: Can my hon. Friend, who is a fellow member of the European Scrutiny Committee, recall that very early on, in March last year, we said in our report that we were deeply concerned that the Government were effectively supplicating the EU, and were agreeing to its own guidelines, and not synchronising the withdrawal arrangements with the future relationship?

Richard Drax: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, who is immensely knowledgeable on all these matters.

The House needs to clarify where it stands. I have seen many amendments and I suspect there are more to come, because that is the way that the Government are now playing their hand, for fear of Parliament’s taking control. Do MPs wish to leave the EU, or do they wish to stay in? That is the question. Some hon. Members are very concerned about no deal, and are tabling amendments in the genuine interests of our country, but for others they are a fig leaf for their wish to remain in the EU. How can we take no deal off the table and let the Prime Minister walk naked to the conference table? How can we do that? It is the last negotiating tool that a Prime Minister has.

We know that the EU always takes it to the last minute. Brinksmanship—that is the name of their game. And let us be honest: do any of us in this House think that we shall strike a fair deal before we leave? I do not think so, because the EU does not want us to go, and is making it clear that it wants to make it as hard as possible for us to leave.

Unfortunately, the behaviour of many in this House is signalling to the EU complete and utter chaos—no sense of purpose, no unity. Imagine if 650 MPs had said, “We are right behind the people of this country, and respect their decision.”
So we have to make up our minds. Are we going to leave with a fair deal? The backstop has been mentioned and, as we know, the backstop could go on indefinitely. We will be out of the EU, but with no one at the table. We will be at the mercy of the EU, we will be subjugated, we will be law takers. This is madness. We need a fair deal, and let us fight for it together. Together, we will get the fair deal. We are divided here, and the EU must be sitting back—the Champagne is out, the Chablis is being drunk, the lobsters have been consumed—and why? Because the EU is looking at the chaos in this place. United we stand: united we will get a fair deal, and we will get out of the EU.

The future has been left blank. We know that we are leaving, and we are told that leave means leave, but leave to where, on what basis? Are we going to have a loose relationship that will mean significant economic disruption, especially for our multinational manufacturing supply chains, and different arrangements for Northern Ireland from those in the rest of the UK, or a closer relationship that will mean the UK’s obeying a whole series of rules over which it no longer has a say? That is the essential Brexit choice, and it has been the Brexit choice since day one. It ought to be spelt out clearly to people.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr McFadden: I will not, because others want to speak.

The fact that that is not being done is not because it is in the national interest to keep things vague or to have a blindfold Brexit. It is because facing up to those options would mean exposing the divisions in the Cabinet and the Conservative party on which of them to pursue. It would mean slaying the Brexit unicorns that imply that there are no fundamental choices to be made. We must expose the reality of what the choices really are. Doing that would mean that the Government would have to level with the public before we left—but that is not their plan. Their plan is to get us out before all this becomes clear, on the pretence that if we agree the withdrawal deal, we can somehow move on and talk about other issues. Sometimes we see Brexit portrayed as a project for the people, and criticism of it as a project by the elite, but planning a Brexit where we hide the true reality of what it means until after we have left is the most elitist thing of all, and that is precisely what the Government are planning.

It is an illusion to pretend that vagueness achieves closure. Vagueness does not achieve closure; it just carries on the argument after we have left, and it does so when we have been placed in a much weaker position as a third country. People talk about taking no deal off the table undermining our negotiating position. It does not undermine our negotiating position; it removes a gun held to our own head. What undermines the negotiating position is agreeing to pay a £39 billion divorce settlement without having the foggier idea of what the future relationship looks like.

If there is to be an extension to the article 50 period, let us use it for a purpose: let us set out properly what leaving means, and let us tell the people clearly once and for all whether we are going for a Canada-type model or a Norway-type model, and let us be candid with the public about the consequences of each option. Clarity would also mean the EU having to be more flexible than it has been until now about the phasing of the discussions; it would have to acknowledge that clarity about the future was in its interests too. This would be a much more honest way of proceeding.

The Prime Minister yesterday, as always, did the absolute minimum to keep the show on the road—to make any extension short and limited so it does not really change anything. But that is not good enough. Having opened the door, there is now an opportunity to do this differently, and we should seize it by making sure that any extension is focused not on a particular timescale but on the key purpose of clarity about the future.
Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I agreed entirely with my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) when she said the atmosphere of this debate was notably different from that of previous debates, and I am delighted if the system of amendable motions, previously so vociferously attacked, may have made some small contribution to enabling sensible debate to take place, because it is, frankly, doing exactly what I hoped might come out of it: breaking the logjam and enabling this House to look sensibly at problems relating to Brexit and to come to conclusions.

In that spirit I am also delighted that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister indicated yesterday that she would move on this issue of removing no deal and extending article 50 for that purpose and enabling the House to express its opinion. It is manifestly obvious that a no-deal Brexit would be catastrophic. I do not want to repeat all the things that have been said. The Government’s own documentation is there, and on top of that I only have to sit in my constituency surgery to have pharmaceutical companies, of which I have many, coming in and explaining the cost to them of having to anticipate no deal—all of which, I might add, will ultimately be manifested in the takings of the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the lack of those funds to pay for public services.

We are impoverishing ourselves: we are making it harder to deliver a good quality of life for our citizens, and we are doing it with a relentless enthusiasm which at last we have found some common sense to check. I have very little doubt that when this matter comes back we will extend article 50, and I hope very much that the Government will finally adopt a policy of indicating that no deal is completely unacceptable.

But I also agree with the point that has been made that there is no point in extending article 50 if we do not know what to do with that. I do not know if this House is going to be capable of coming to a consensus. As a Member of this House, I accept that if there is a majority in this House for some form of Brexit and we vote for it and it is deliverable, that is doubtless what will happen, whatever my personal views may be. However, I will just say this—and I will repeat it, I suspect, ad nauseam until this whole sorry saga is over: I only have to look at the emails I get on Brexit from people who want to leave to see that the principle theme is the demand to leave in the form of catastrophic no-deal Brexit.

The reason that I am getting those emails is that people have, in my opinion, been thoroughly misled over a long period by a form of propaganda that believes that the EU is evil. This was rather highlighted by the extraordinary speech of my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax), who put forward the stab-in-the-back theory, I am sorry, but these are mad fantasies. They are absolute fantasies about the EU and its relationship with us. So people are writing in and saying that is what we should be doing, but I have to say that we are not going to be doing it.

The fact is that we are likely to be offering an extraordinary halfway house palliative that a large number of Members of the House absolutely know will be less good than remaining in the EU. Maybe that is a burden that we are going to have to carry because of the 2016 referendum result, but speaking personally I find it deeply unacceptable that I should park every aspect of my own opinion and evaluation of these options simply in order to go along with an instruction that is now nearly three years old and seems to be running out of steam in virtually every single one of its characteristics.

That is why I urge my right hon. Friends on the Treasury Bench not to ignore the possibility of consulting the public. If the public want the Prime Minister’s deal, which is the only deal we are ever likely to get, then so be it; but if not, they should have the option to express the view that they want to stay. Ultimately, my own opinion is that that would be very much better than anything else we have done.

I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) has been successful with his amendment, and I am happy to have supported him. I should also like to say to my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), in conclusion, that he talks about dysfunctional relationships, and some people looking at the two of us would say that our relationship has been dysfunctional for a long time, but we have stayed in the same party, and that is a good reason for our staying in the EU as well.
relationship, with the aim of making the contentious Irish backstop redundant, and then putting the whole thing to a public vote.

My understanding is that Brussels is determined to avoid offering us a brief extension. That august organ, the *Evening Standard*, is making that point this very afternoon. Brussels is determined to avoid offering us a brief extension, because that would lead to the danger of having to revisit the issue again in the summer if—or when—the Government again fail to win Parliament round. Donald Tusk has indicated that the extension we propose would be the optimal period of time, and an EU diplomat said yesterday that the “21-month extension makes sense as it would cover the multi-financial framework”—the EU’s budget period—“and make things easier. Provided leaders are not completely down with Brexit fatigue, and a three-month technical extension won’t cut it, I would expect a 21-month kick” of the can.

**Hilary Benn:** Does the hon. Gentleman agree that a longer article-50 extension might encourage the EU to change its current approach and, since it needs a purpose during the 21 months—if that was the period—recognise that it could turn its attention to negotiating the future partnership?

**Hywel Williams:** The Chairman of the Exiting the European Union Committee makes a fine point. As they say, it takes two to tango, and an extension might induce a bit of dancing from the EU.

Our Government’s disastrous handling of the UK’s departure from the EU can be seen clearly in the statement that the Secretary of State for International Trade gave on Monday, and I was here in a thinly attended Chamber to listen to it. He outlined his decisions on trade protections following a flawed consultation on EU trade remedies that was begun over 18 months ago, when conditions, perceptions, knowledge and understanding of Brexit were, to say the least, a little different from today.

According to the statement, we are abandoning most existing trade protections on the basis of criteria that have produced some pretty serendipitous results. Without repeating the details, which are available in *Hansard*, I am sure that the ironing board industry is mightily pleased with the continuing specific protection for that particular industry, while parts of the steel industry may be less happy. Participants in other sectors, particularly small-scale businesses, may be as unaware of Monday’s outcome as they were of the initial consultation, because the responses to it were few.

On Monday, a former Secretary of State for Wales praised the statement as


All I can say is that he is much more easily pleased than the people of Wales. Indeed, if the statement impressed the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), it was probably not in my nation’s best interests, and the same applies to the whole sorry Brexit saga.

**Several hon. Members rose.**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. A four-minute limit now applies to Back-Bench speeches. I call Alberto Costa.

5.32 pm

**Alberto Costa** (South Leicestershire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for selecting my amendment (b). As all Members will probably know, I have been a loyal Conservative Member. I have never rebelled and have scarcely spoken out of turn. I believe and continue to believe that, as Members of various political parties, we are at our best when we stick together and promote the political policies upon which we were elected. However, when an amendment attracts such broad consensus across the House, including from the leaders of every Opposition party and, importantly for me, the support of right hon. and hon. Friends across the Brexit debate on the Government Benches, a sensible Government must accept that reasonable amendment. I am therefore grateful that the Government have acted reasonably in accepting my amendment in full.

My amendment does not deal in goods or services, backstops or borders, but people—living and breathing, skin and bone. That such an amendment is needed is in itself a sad state of affairs. The rights and freedoms of over 1 million UK citizens in the EU and over 3 million EU citizens in the UK should never have been used as a bargaining chip during the negotiations for our withdrawal from the European Union. That such rights were placed on the table in the first place was wrong.

While I welcome the Government’s unilateral undertaking, it does not go far enough, and we need to do more. I have backed the Prime Minister’s deal and will continue to, but with the spectre of uncertainty hanging over the heads of over 5 million people, it is right that this House has positively coalesced around a good message to send not just to the country and to EU citizens, but to President Donald Tusk and the European Council, which is carefully listening to our proceedings.

The time for ring-fencing these rights was at the outset of the UK’s decision to leave the EU, and it is now imperative that the Government do everything they reasonably can to seek consensus from the European Council and get a legal mandate for the European Commission to carve out those rights. The Prime Minister said yesterday that the EU Commission does not have the legal authority. I spoke to Professor Smismans, professor of EU law at Cardiff University, this morning, and he said it is correct that the European Commission has not been mandated to negotiate a separate agreement on citizens’ rights, but that the European Council can revise that mandate at any time. There is no legal hurdle at all.

I would like to hear from the Government exactly what measures the Prime Minister will take to ensure that this amendment, which has been adopted by the Government, is complied with. Will she be writing a letter to President Donald Tusk? If so, when will she write it? What other measures can the Government take to ensure that the Council gives that mandate to the Commission to carve out citizens’ rights as quickly as possible?

**Charlie Elphicke:** Does my hon. Friend agree that this should have been sorted out back in 2016? It is quite wrong that we are discussing it now.

**Alberto Costa:** Yes. As I said earlier, I entirely agree that this matter should have been dealt with at the outset of the United Kingdom’s decision to leave the EU.
Dr Whitford: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Alberto Costa: I do not have time, but I thank the hon. Lady and all her colleagues for supporting my amendment. It is time we sent a clear message.

There has been some discussion about my position in the Government. There is a convention that a Parliamentary Private Secretary is expected to resign if they table an amendment, which is all I would say on the matter.

Finally, I thank all hon. and right hon. Members on both sides of the House who have graciously and very kindly offered to support my amendment. We can all take pride in informing our constituents and fellow British citizens in the EU that we put citizens’ rights at the very front. I thank the campaigning groups the3million, which supports the rights of EU nationals here, and British in Europe, which supports the rights of British nationals in the EU. Citizens’ rights is not about party politics. It is about people.

5.37 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): It is such an honour to follow the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa). He has handled this issue so well, and he has added so much to the reputation of this place by how he has dealt with his amendment. I thank him, and I am proud to have signed the amendment. He may be right that there is a convention that PPSs resign when they table an amendment that is not in line with the Government’s thinking but, given that the Government have accepted the amendment, I suggest that the convention is an ass. He should be back in his post, because he is doing a sterling job.

It seems that yesterday the Prime Minister did just enough to prevent resignations from her ministerial ranks and to keep her sordid show on the road for a few more days, but the vote she promised on 13 March does not take no deal off the table. On the contrary, it leaves no deal on the table for another two weeks. I fail to understand how that deliberately created uncertainty is supposed to help employers and small businesses in my Brighton constituency, or indeed across the country, to make the decisions they need to make.

It is simply incredible that, with just 30 days left on the clock, this Prime Minister is still prepared to entertain the economic and social catastrophe of no deal. Worse still, my constituents will have been horrified to hear her say yesterday that she could “make a success of a no deal.” —[Official Report, 26 February 2019; Vol. 655, c. 166.]

Make no mistake, a no-deal exit would tear us from every EU law, instrument and agency overnight, and we would have nothing to replace them with. The Government’s own assessment of the economic impact of no deal, published yesterday, reinforces just what a catastrophe it would be.

My constituents deserve better than that, as does the country, and it does not have to be this way. There are alternatives to this never-ending game of chicken between the Prime Minister and the various factions of her party. The best, most democratic option is to give the public a final say on their future. In 2016, voters could not and did not express any opinion on the terms on which the UK should leave the EU, because those terms were completely unknown then, not least because they had yet to be negotiated with the EU27. What is certainly the case is that no one was voting for this dangerous, blindfold Brexit now offered by the Prime Minister, one that was rejected by this House on 15 January. The Prime Minister keeps saying that a public vote would fail to “respect” the 2016 referendum result, but that is the same as saying that electing a new Government fails to respect the previous election result. This Government have spent almost three years negotiating what they believe to be the best possible way of implementing the 2016 result and now the people should get a chance to say whether or not they think this Government have done enough. That does not seem to be radical to me.

Finally, I wish to say a few words about the amendment on environmental protection standing in my name. Yesterday, the Prime Minister talked again of ensuring that Brexit would not lead to any lowering of environmental protection standards. That is all very well but we know that such promises of non-regression are entirely worthless without concrete action to ensure that those standards can be effectively enforced. As I and many others have said repeatedly in this House over the past two years, that requires the embedding of environmental principles in UK law, and the establishment of an independent and adequately resourced environmental body or bodies across the UK, to replace the roles of the European Commission and European Court of Justice in terms of oversight of and, crucially, compliance with environmental law. So my amendment notes that the Environment Secretary’s “proposals for an Office for Environmental Protection in England need to be significantly strengthened to guarantee its independence from Government, include climate change within its remit and provide it with the necessary powers to ensure the monitoring, reporting, oversight and enforcement of environmental law”.

5.41 pm

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): I am a little frustrated, because all the mood music today has been very negative and I think we have forgotten that 52% of the people voted for Brexit. Why did they do it? It is clear that they wanted sovereignty over their laws and the economic opportunity that Brexit would allow. We seem to have forgotten that we are in deficit with the EU and in surplus with the rest of the world, and that is what this is all about.

We are now struggling to negotiate this withdrawal agreement, which seems to be totally trapped in negativity and in terms of finding any real solution. I take my hat off to those on both the leave and remain side who have endeavoured to find a way through this with the Malthouse compromise, but from everything I have seen that simply is not being listened to—I wish to goodness that it were. I am looking carefully at what is being said about the options, because if we cannot agree a deal, we have to accept that we have to look at no deal. So many people have said today that that is unacceptable, but I say to them that when they read the paperwork and the reports, they should remember that there are always two sides to every argument. I ask them to look to see whether or not they have a balanced view, even when looking at the Government paper which has been referred to today.

Of all the possible options that will deliver certainty—we know what no deal means—this is the only one that would deliver sovereignty and give us back our economic freedom. It also puts us in a much better place to negotiate a good deal after 29 March, and we must not forget that. The Government’s paper is not all doom
and gloom about it; it says that 85% of the preparation that needs to be done has been done. It also says that the reason that no more has been done is because of a failure to communicate to businesses—that is absolutely right. I serve on the Public Accounts Committee and we have heard from every Department about how prepared they are. We hear what the challenge is; the one thing they are not able to do and allowed to do is talk to the people who really matter—the people who are going to have to implement this. We should be encouraging the Government to get this right, because it will put us in a better place to do a better deal.

No-deal will enable us to negotiate deals with other countries and to deal with the EU, as I said. We should not dismiss GATT—the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade—which has been referred to before. The assumption is being made that the EU will not allow us to exercise article XXIV of GATT to get zero tariffs, a view with which I simply do not agree. For me, no deal should be seen as an opportunity, not a threat.

Equally, I am not happy with the concept of an extension. I cannot see how we can achieve more in three months than we have already tried to achieve. My fear is that at the end of this process we will find ourselves not with the three choices about which the Prime Minister talks, but with a straight choice between no deal and our right to withdraw our notification under article 50. I noted carefully that for the first time without any need, the Prime Minister mentioned that after she said we would be having the three votes. She said that if it comes to it, she would not support our retracting article 50, but she said before that no deal is better than a bad deal and she has retracted that, and she said that there would be no extension but has retracted that. Let us hope to goodness that she keeps her promise, because otherwise it would undermine democracy and the referendum result.

5.45 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I rise to speak briefly, first in support of amendment (i), the Liberal Democrat amendment, which would have established a Brexit redundancy fund. According to the UK Trade Policy Observatory, something like 750,000 people could lose their jobs in a no-deal scenario. That is linked to what the Government’s own report said about a potential 9% drop in GDP. The idea behind a Brexit redundancy fund would be to provide training and advice to people who had lost their jobs as a result of Brexit, or a no-deal Brexit in particular. Of course, some people have already lost their jobs as a result of Brexit uncertainty. It is clear that the Government have some money available for this purpose, because as I understand it the Prime Minister has been seeking to secure £1.6 billion, quite a lot of which is apparently to be spent in constituencies such as Basestlaw. I am sure that has nothing to do with Brexit, but it is clearly strange that certain constituencies with leave-voting Labour Members are apparently going to receive a substantial portion of the money. The Government should set up a Brexit redundancy fund, and I welcome the support from Members from other parties for the amendment.

Secondly, I wish to draw attention to amendment (h), which would have allowed for the Government to embark on the preparations necessary for a public vote. I suspect that sometime soon we will reach the point at which that will become necessary, because the Prime Minister will have run out of other options and will feel that a people’s vote is the best way to get her deal in front of the public, alongside the option of staying in the European Union. I think she will get there eventually.

I welcome amendment (k) from the SNP, with support from other parties, which does what it says on the tin. In other words, it says very clearly, “We’re not going to leave without a deal, whatever the circumstances.” There would be broad and clear majority support for that in this House.

I also welcome amendment (e) on environmental standards, which was tabled by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) but has not been selected for a vote. The EU has led on environmental standards and many of us are worried that if we leave, it will no longer play that role, which I am afraid is not one that I expect Ministers to pick up with any great degree of enthusiasm.

I was happy to support amendment (b). We need some clarity not only for EU citizens in the UK but for UK citizens in the EU. In France, for instance, people who are trying to secure the equivalent of settled status may be facing a charge of €100 or €150 per person per year, over a five-year period, to secure their status. That is clearly something on which we should be campaigning.

No deal would clearly be a catastrophe. There are examples in the Government’s own report about the hit to GDP. One third of critical projects are off track. SMEs have made virtually no preparations for a no-deal scenario. Indeed, to make matters worse, the Department for International Trade has apparently decided to stop briefing businesses on free trade agreements because apparently there have been leaks. As I understand it, the biggest leaks tend to come from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, so perhaps that needs to be looked into.

It is clear that the Government need to seek an extension to article 50, and the clear purpose for that would be to secure a people’s vote.

5.49 pm

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): On 29 January, I abstained on the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady) partly because I did not understand it conceptually, but also because I did not see how it was acceptable for a Government to have their own policy and agreement to an international treaty amended by way of a Back-Bench amendment. In the meantime, on the same date, I was pleased to see the amendment tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) pass. Although it was not legally binding, it was important to put on record the unacceptable to the House of a no deal. I suspect that, without a Whip, the majority would have been very much more significant.

By 14 February, when this matter came back for debate, I voted for the Government motion, which essentially supported both the Brady and the Spelman amendments. I was sorry to see it defeated. The point here was not that I had suddenly succumbed to the wonders of the Brady position, but rather that I understood that some level of compromise was needed to give the Prime Minister a stable base on which to negotiate.
Of course many Members, myself included, are very concerned at further attempts to kick the can down the road yet again. The problem is that we have now run out of road and decisions will have to be taken. I am actually pretty open-minded on the terms of the deal for our withdrawal from the EU, although I shall certainly have more defined views on what our future relationship should be. To that extent, I would like to see time set aside for indicative votes to be held to debate our future relationship with the EU. We must now look forward to our future with the EU as a partner rather than just look back at how we get out of it. The key mistake we made on leaving was to start negotiations without an agreed position, which made us very easy prey for the EU negotiators. I will advocate Norway plus, and others may have different proposals, but the inaction cannot happen again as we head towards the next round of negotiations on a future deal.

However, my immediate concern is that we do not leave the EU without a deal and that we provide the breathing space that business so badly needs. To fall off the cliff would be to invite scarcity, lower living standards, and lost employment and lower investment in the UK, and I share the concern of many MPs that the people will punish us for that. When I say “us” I mean all of us—not just the governing party, but the Opposition, who will be seen not to have acted in the national interest.

I certainly welcome the Prime Minister’s promise yesterday to allow a vote to extend article 50 in the event that the meaningful vote and then a no-deal resolution are rejected. The Government will need to elaborate on whether they will whip to oppose no deal and also to support any article 50 extension. The Minister seemed just a bit uneasy about answering that key question earlier today. Also, will the House determine the length of the extension, and if the EU makes a counter-proposal on the extension period, will the Government bring that period to the House for debate?

The answer is seemingly yes from what the Minister said earlier, but I think that we will need further elaboration. I am also still very concerned about the ongoing delay in bringing forward the meaningful vote, which I support, with all its damaging delay implications for business. Let me be clear: I have no interest in delaying Brexit day, but nothing could be worse than leaving without a deal.

I was saddened to see the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition failing to engage immediately after heavily losing the first meaningful vote, which I supported. That was the wrong approach, and I think that the Prime Minister knows that we will sort this matter out only when she engages with all Members of this House who are prepared to take a sensible approach to negotiating with the EU. I was pleased to hear the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) confirm today that Labour is prepared to talk.

Since the votes on 29 January, I have seen nothing coming from the EU to suggest that it is prepared to reopen the terms of the withdrawal agreement—quite the opposite. That is not to say that we should not continue to engage with the EU. Indeed, it may be the case that we can agree some kind of ancillary document—perhaps a binding one—that provides a roadmap towards ending the need for the backstop.
The European Union project is grounded in that common cause for peace, recognising that by pooling our efforts we will not weaken the UK’s standing in the world but rather embolden it. As we marked the centenary of the Armistice of the great war last November, we remembered the horrors of the 20th century. Those horrors could come again; this world is so unpredictable. Now is not the time to be stepping back from our European friends and neighbours, and splintering the European Union. We should be stepping up and joining together to tackle the issues that face us.

5.57 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I begin by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) for his amendment (b). He spoke with great distinction and clarity, demonstrating that this House can be united on such an issue as Brexit. It is challenging, but he has demonstrated great principle and a considered approach in the way in which he has been able to unify us and bring so many of us together.

Those of us in this House who promised to honour the vote in the referendum back in 2016—in fact, that is most of us—and who went on to stand on our respective manifestos seeking to honour that result then voted to trigger article 50 and to leave the EU on 29 March this year. We must now ask ourselves how this situation—not just the debates in this House, but the way in which the negotiations have been taking place and have been handled—looks to the 17.4 million who voted to leave, and to those who voted to remain, when it comes to respecting the result of the referendum.

It is inevitable that I am going to say that the negotiations have not been handled in the most structured way. The Government have missed opportunities to change their approach, and it is fair to say that the warning signs have been there for a considerable amount of time—through the proposals that became the Chequers agreement and then the withdrawal agreement, which in my view were not right for this country. However, the point is that we know that the deal as it stands now is not acceptable to many, and there is more work to do. The right response would be for the Government to carry on listening and to pursue a better deal. At the same time, we are now hearing much more about the whole push for a second referendum that would seek to deny the British people the rights and freedoms that they voted for back in 2016. Voting for delay without even specifying what would be achieved by it is not the right approach at all, and it saddens me that we are now in that position.

The fact is, the Prime Minister undertook to go back to Brussels to reopen the withdrawal agreement, and on 29 January this House voted and showed what sort of deal can command a majority in the House of Commons. No deal is not the outcome that we are all aiming for. We want a deal that can actually speak to the challenges associated with the backstop. All the other choices could mean that we end up going back on the verdict of the British public, backingtracking on our promises and undermining democracy. The various arguments have been made about letting down our country. We will end up with irretrievable ramifications, not just for our political parties but for our democracy and our country. None of us wants to see that.

In the coming weeks we have an opportunity, and the Government have an opportunity, to secure a better deal and bring back a withdrawal agreement that has legally binding changes so that the UK can leave the backstop and, importantly, deliver the Brexit that the British people were promised.

6.1 pm

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): Yesterday, in sharp distinction to the “Groundhog Day” debates and statements from the Prime Minister that we have had previously, we had two really important concessions and changes in policy from the Government. One was the admission, at last, that the sovereignty of this House is important and that we cannot simply fall out of the EU through no deal and go on to WTO terms without this House having a say. That was always true, but the Prime Minister was forced to concede it yesterday. The second crucial concession was that it is not holy writ that we leave on 29 March and there may be a longer period. Those are both important concessions.

As colleagues of mine have said today, if we do get to the point, as I expect, of no deal being voted down by this House and there being a vote in favour of an extension of article 50, we need to make sure that that extension is used for a purpose and not for more of the ludicrous merry-go-round that we have had in recent months. In that context, I pay tribute to the various across the House—in particular, to Conservative Front Benchers who stood up for their values and refused to allow this place to be railroaded by the Prime Minister and driven to the edge of no deal.

However, the truth is that no deal is only marginally worse than the deal that is on offer. Indeed, one could argue quite rightly, as some in the ERG would, that in respect of the sovereignty arguments, the Prime Minister’s deal on offer right now is, in some regards, worse than no deal, however catastrophic that would be for the economy of our country. It is an absolute badge of shame for the Prime Minister that she has been dragged kicking and screaming to this point as we have lost jobs at Nissan, Honda, Ford and so many other companies across our country.

Yet my real concern is that the most likely outcome is still that the armchair generals of the ERG who loll languidly on their Benches are going to get their way—that they are going to get the Prime Minister to the point where Brexit goes through. They will ultimately, I think, be successful—the victors in this Russian roulette game that they have been playing for so long. There are those of us on the Opposition Benches and on the Conservative Benches who still understand and believe that Brexit is ultimately deeply destructive for our country, not just for our economy but for our values—for what we believe in, and not just in a Labour party that is overtly internationalist, outward-looking and tolerant, and understands that we need to be all those things to succeed in the 21st century and for the benefit of the wider culture of our society. It is not only me and other Opposition Members who are deeply worried by the rise in right-wing extremism in our country fuelled and delivered by Brexit. Unfortunately, those things will only be compounded if we exit, whether it is the Prime Minister’s or the ERG’s version of Brexit.

Sir William Cash: I think the hon. Gentleman is rather exaggerating, if I may say so. Is not the truth, as I
wrote even in 1990, that if we take away the right of the people to decide their own destiny, they will end up moving to the far right?

Owen Smith: We have seen a 100% increase in violent racist attacks since the Brexit vote—that is the truth. Brexit is exacerbating underlying problems in our society. It is a racist, xenophobic, right-wing, reactionary project, and we in the Labour party should be fighting against it with every sinew of our being.

I will use my last minute to plead with people in this House and across the country that if they believe, as I do, that Brexit will damage not only our economy but the values that underpin our society—the good values of Britain—then they need to start saying so. There is a narrow window of opportunity to contest this before some form of Brexit, whether the Prime Minister’s or the ERG’s, goes through. It may well go through by the end of this month.

There is an opportunity to speak and march against Brexit in London on 23 March. People the length and breadth of Britain should join us for that and make their voice heard. We should still contest Brexit. There is still an opportunity to beat it and allow Britain to pull itself back from the brink. It is not anti-democratic to give the people one further say. It would be the democratic thing to do, and I will urge people to do that until I can urge them no more.

6.6 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith), although I slightly disagree with him, because I know people who have campaigned and argued over many decades to leave the European Union, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), who do so for honourable motives of freedom and control over laws. I happen to disagree with my hon. Friend quite passionately about that, but he is almost as left-wing as I am on many economic matters. We should be careful about the way in which we describe the motives of people on one side or the other.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) on the work they have done to reach across the House. That work to bring us together is so important. Nobody will be satisfied with everything; that is an impossibility. However, we can come much closer together, and for the sake of the nation, that is vital.

I agree with the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) that the way in which we talk about our relationship with our European friends and neighbours is extremely important. Most of them are very sad about this. They are not rubbing their hands with glee that we are leaving. They still want us to stay; I have heard that from so many people. They viewed us as a sensible, pragmatic country that helps the European cause, and they regret us leaving. It is therefore vital that as we leave—and I believe we must leave; that was the vote—we must maintain those close relationships and perhaps even get closer, because we will have to conduct them bilaterally and not through the means of the European Union.

I am against this business of leaving no deal on the table. The negotiations have gone far beyond that. This is not some game of chicken. This has to be a mature, grown-up relationship between parties that will remain close even if we are a bit more separate than we have been in the past. Let us do this in a mature way.

I would say to my great friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Stone—he should be the right hon. Member for Stone—that I gently take issue with what he said about article 4 of the withdrawal agreement. All these matters take time to disentangle. We will leave the European Union, but it will not be a clean break. Some areas of the withdrawal agreement will go on applying for up to eight years when it comes to citizens’ rights. It is vital that, just as when we entered the European Union it took quite a long time for us to come together on the various issues of policy, so as we leave, some issues will be hangovers for a period. We should not confuse that with being subject to the European Union. We should say that those are areas where we will continue to co-operate as we gradually move apart.

My final point is that we need to come together. I believe that today has been the beginning of that—the tone of the debate and the speeches has been very good—and we must continue to do that as we move forward.

Mr Speaker: Order. A further nine right hon. and hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye, and I am keen to accommodate them. I would simply say that interventions are perfectly orderly, but they are at this stage unhelpful to those waiting to speak. People can do the arithmetic for themselves. There is only half an hour or so to go before the Front-Bench winding-up speeches.

6.10 pm

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Ind): It is an absolute pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy). How much I agreed with everything that he said.

The situation is really quite disgraceful. It is a disgrace, and when history records what has happened over the last two and a half years, it will not falter to put the blame where I am afraid it has to be put. It will not fail to observe that one of the most striking features of the last two and a half years, among too many right hon. and hon. Members in this place, has been a breath-taking lack of courage and honesty. When I say that I mean honesty about the situation we found ourselves in after the EU referendum, honesty about the choices we face and honesty with the electorate about the consequences of the choices we face.

As I think everybody in this place knows, I was one of the people who, with members of then other political parties—I am not actually in a political party at the moment; that does not really matter—founded, and I am proud of the fact that we worked cross-party, something called the People’s Vote. It came after a great deal of thought and consideration. As far as I am concerned, it is not designed to thwart or frustrate Brexit; I get tired of some of the words that are used in such a disparaging and very silly way. It was a genuine desire to find a solution to the unholy mess that we had got ourselves into, and I still believe that the only way through this mess and through this crisis is by taking it back to the British people.
I take very grave exception to hon. Members on the Conservative Benches, who really should know better, saying that in saying we want a people’s vote we are saying that people were stupid, did not know better and did not understand back in 2016. Let us be very clear about why so many of us who believe in a people’s vote, and it is a growing number, take that view in the face of the death threats, the threats to our safety, the threat of deselection—not now in my happy case—and so on. The reason we say it is that it is right that people are entitled to change their minds. It is right that young people—denied a vote by virtue of their age in 2016, but now obviously of the age when they can vote—should have a say about their future, given that they more than anyone will bear the burden of Brexit. But there is this: now we know what Brexit looks like, and we did not—any of us—know what we meant when we put to the Great British people the option of leave.

I do take grave exception to something else: the fact that this Government—a Conservative Government—have still refused to take no deal off the table. I take grave exception to that not only because there is no mandate for it and it was not promised at all—in fact, the opposite was promised by leave campaigners, who promised us a deal before we even left the European Union—but because this Government know the facts about the huge danger that it poses to the economy and the future prosperity of all the people of this country, and faced with those facts in black and white, as I saw yesterday, they still refuse to take it off the table. That is my priority—making sure that no deal is not an option—and that is why I will be supporting amendment (a).

6.14 am

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Following the long-running British soap, “Carry On Brexit”, is testing for everyone. However, tonight things have changed, in ways that I do not think the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) quite realised. He said that nothing will change, and that this will not work. In fact, a lot has changed, and I believe that it can work. Let me explain why.

The outstanding issue between the Government and the EU is restricted to an insurance policy for the Northern Ireland border that both sides have said they would not wish to trigger. It cannot be beyond the wit of the UK’s and EU’s diplomatic skills to resolve this issue. When the Exiting the European Union Committee was in Brussels a month ago, I summarised a way through that amounts to a legally binding annex to the backstop review clause, ensuring that we cannot be locked into the customs union indefinitely against our will. That led to revised advice from the Attorney General and triggered support from the Democratic Unionist party of Northern Ireland and from the European Research Group on this side of the House.

There was no objection to that in Brussels but simply a question about whether such changes would pass in the House of Commons. None of us will know that until the votes are counted, but such changes should—I believe would—be the catalyst for success, urged on by a recognition of what would happen should Parliament not approve the withdrawal agreement Bill and then vote, under the Prime Minister’s commitment, to proceed without a deal. There can be no doubt about the result of that.

We may not have the support of all my colleagues, judging from the speeches of my hon. Friends the Members for Stone (Sir William Cash) and for South Dorset (Richard Drax), but paradise is not for this world. What matters today, therefore, are the amendments proposed. I believe the Letwin-Cooper and Spelman-Dromey amendments will not be moved, and the Costa amendment has been accepted. As a signatory to amendment (b), tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for South Leciestershire (Alberto Costa), I know that the EU has the same difficulty in agreeing to the same commitment to the rights of UK citizens in the EU as we have to EU nationals here, because it does not have the authority to do so over the 27 member states’ sovereignty. However, the European Parliament’s Brexit co-ordinator, Guy Verhofstadt, has cleared said that the European Parliament will not accept uneven citizens’ rights when it considers the withdrawal agreement Bill and will therefore oblige the European Union to ensure reciprocity. I am therefore pleased that the Government have accepted the spirit and direction of this Conservative-led amendment.

That leaves us with amendment (k), tabled by the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), which has been made redundant by the Government’s commitment to a vote on no deal if the withdrawal agreement is not approved, and amendment (a), tabled by the Leader of the Opposition. The right hon., and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras’ explanation of amendment (a) was, in my view, weak. None of his points referred directly to citizens’ rights, money and Northern Ireland—the three ingredients of the withdrawal agreement. Everything that he mentioned is sketched out in the political declaration and will be negotiated in detail during the transition period, as he knows. I therefore cannot see any reason why Labour Members, elected on a similar manifesto to Government Members, should not support the Government on the withdrawal agreement Bill.

My message is clear: the Government and the European Union must resolve the backstop issue, to relieve and reduce the already increased uncertainty of citizens and businesses across Europe, as soon as possible. Having done so, Labour should continue to talk with the Government, because the differences between our manifesto, which seeks a customs arrangement, and theirs, which calls for a customs partnership, should surely not be insurmountable. Everyone—especially those who have emailed me to suggest that no deal is no problem—should read the Government’s recently released analysis. It would be a problem. We must support the Bill.

6.18 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I have not met a Member who supports no deal who has experienced real poverty—the scarcity that, in previous eras, was so common: the destitution that families endured in workhouses in Victorian England, the deprivation in the east end that led to the birth of the Salvation Army. There may be a few left now who experienced forced rationing during the second world war.

However, having grown up in the shadow of the Broadwater Farm estate in Tottenham in the 1970s, I know what it feels like to get home and find the cupboards empty; the indignity of living pay cheque to pay cheque;
the melancholy of not being able to spend time with family at weekends because they work three jobs, as my mother did.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Lammy: I will not, because of the time available.

If we do not stop a no-deal Brexit, a whole generation of families will be impoverished. “Project Fear” will become project reality. The Government’s own assessments, forced out last night, estimate that no deal will make our economy up to 9% weaker over 15 years. Food prices will rise and customs checks will cost British businesses £13 billion per year. This will make the 2008 recession seem like a blip. Hundreds of businesses and thousands more jobs will leave the country. The Governor of the Bank of England has warned that house prices will crash by up to a third. Sainsbury’s, Asda and Co-op told us that no deal will leave our shelves empty. The Health Secretary could not rule out medicine shortages causing early deaths. Britons living in Europe will lose their rights overnight. We will fall out of the EU’s crime-fighting agencies and lose the European arrest warrant. No-deal Brexit is a dereliction of the first duty of a Government, which is to keep the public safe, so I suggest to the Government that they should say tonight that they would vote against that no deal.

Crashing out of the EU without a deal would be the single greatest failure of this Government and of any Government in modern British history: a failure of leave campaigners to deliver the utopia they sold to voters in 2016; a failure of Parliament to stand up for our constituents; and, most of all, a failure of the Prime Minister to put the country before her party and her narrow self-interest. By refusing to rule it out herself, she is deliberately causing confusion, pain and panic. The Prime Minister has made a Faustian pact with the hard-right mob in her party who want to dismantle the EU’s social protections at any cost.

Brexit is a con by multi-millionaires to convince the poor that the metropolitan middle class has screwed them, knowing full well that the financial crisis is the fault of their own gambling on the markets and that Brexit is a chance to double down on it again. The Brexiteers have enough capital to profit out of this disaster, so I will call them out. The hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). As the son of a milkman and the grandson of miners, I will take no lessons from him.

I and people like me who voted to leave still believe in leave. All the while, the people out there—the 17.4 million people out there—are bewildered by what goes on in this place and by what is happening. I can tell you what has changed in this place in the past 84 days: we have lost our nerve, if we ever had it in the first place. The hyperbole has gone up and the hysteria has gone up, but all the while people out there do not understand what we are doing.

What should have changed in this place in the past 84 days is that we should have got real and recognised that what has happened is only hamstringing our ability to get a deal from the European Union right now. What also should have changed in the past 84 days was that the Government should have actually tried to negotiate in a meaningful way, and taken something like the Malthouse compromise and pushed it through in a way that I am not convinced they are yet doing. We have to realise something in this place, and I hate to break it to you all, but it is not about you—[ Interruption. ] You outsourced this decision in 2016 to the people and you are now trying to in-source, erroneously, the implementation, and it is not working. You do not understand the democratic deficit that is coming out and that I see in my constituency, and I am sure hon. Members—[ Interruption. ]

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must be heard. I know that he is using the word “you”—he is using it as a rhetorical device. I do not take offence at that, but he must be heard.

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): Eighty-four days ago I last spoke in this Chamber on Brexit and since that time nothing has fundamentally changed: the EU remains as intransigent as ever and people in this place are seeking to frustrate the will of the people, as was so eloquently outlined by the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). As the son of a milkman and the grandson of miners, I will take no lessons from him.

I and people like me who voted to leave still believe in leave. All the while, the people out there—the 17.4 million people out there—are bewildered by what goes on in this place and by what is happening. I can tell you what has changed in this place in the past 84 days: we have lost our nerve, if we ever had it in the first place. The hyperbole has gone up and the hysteria has gone up, but all the while people out there do not understand what we are doing.

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Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must be heard. I know that he is using the word “you”—he is using it as a rhetorical device. I do not take offence at that, but he must be heard.

Lee Rowley: Hon. Members do not understand the democratic deficit that is coming out and that is completely obvious in places like my constituency and elsewhere. This is not about us. We have a decision to make. I am happy to compromise. I will compromise on money and on timelines—if I have to—and with such things as the Malthouse compromise, but I will not take false choices and false options, which it seems are about to be presented to us.

We have a clear decision to make. If a good deal is put to this place in a few weeks’ time, I will vote for it, and vote for it happily. However, this place has already said that the deal that came here last time was a bad one. If that deal comes back and it is not materially changed I will vote against it, because it will not work for our country in the long term. I will vote against taking no deal off the table because that would hamstring our ability to negotiate, and I will vote against an extension of article 50, because there is no reason to extend it when we do not know why we are asking for
that extension. We have a choice to make. The people out there are watching and they are tired of and bewildered by the games that are being played in here. We have to leave on 29 March, and I hope that people will wise up in the next few days and weeks to make sure that happens.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. After the next speaker, the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), the time limit on Back-Bench speeches will go down to three minutes in a bid to accommodate everybody, but he luxuriates in the lather of four.

6.26 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I know that it is traditional in this House to say, “It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Gentleman,” but may I say that it is not a pleasure at all? I represent probably everything that he does not, and I will tell him something: I loathe Brexit—I truly, utterly loathe it. I hate the economically disastrous, isolating ugliness of the whole project. I particularly loathe the fact that the Government are prepared to take my beautiful, consensual, inclusive nation out of the European Union against its national collective will.

Just when we thought that this overwhelming, chaotic cluelessness could not get any worse, we have this week. I am trying to figure out what has happened this week. I hear all the warm remarks that somehow there is a bit of progress and that we are actually a few steps forward. My sense of what we have actually done is this: we are still going to leave, but just not on the day that we thought. We might have a no-deal Brexit, but it is very unlikely that no deal might extend to the 29th. We have not got a clue on what sort of basis the Government want to leave. They are hoping in vain that somehow the European Union will grant some sort of concession on the backstop. We have already heard from the French that they are not prepared to have an extension unless it is for a purpose. This is all for absolutely nothing. Their Brexit is breaking the country. It is now starting to break the UK political parties, and it is well on its way to consuming this Government, too.

This is perhaps the greatest post-war political disaster in our politics. It will be remembered as the single greatest failure of any British Government, and let us remember that it is exclusively a Tory Brexit, almost laughingly designed to try to resolve the differences about Europe in the Government’s own party. Not only has it further divided their rotten party, but it has divided a nation and taken it to the brink. It is they that initiated, designed and administered it. It will define them for decades to come. This chaos will be their legacy.

The Government have driven us along this Brexit road with all the guile of Wile E. Coyote with an Acme rocket strapped to his back. Now the road is running out and that final boulder is about to come crashing down on their head, yet they say that I have to support their Brexit. They say that if I do not support it, I risk a no-deal Brexit and all the chaos that will bring. I will never support their Brexit. I will never accept my country getting taken out against its will. I will not support anything that makes my constituents poorer. I will not support the end of freedom of movement, which will decimate businesses in my constituency and stop population growth in my country. I will never, ever accept the fact that the rights that I enjoyed to live, to work, to love across a continent will be denied to future generations of young people. I will never, ever accept that. We have tabled an amendment to revoke the whole ugly business. This madness must end. We have had our chance. I know that our amendment (g) cannot be debated because it has been signed by only 12 Members, but I bet that if it were put to the public just now, it would be about the most popular option in this country, just to end this madness, and I hope that we still get an opportunity. To vote on it.

However, Scotland has a way out. We can get off the sinking ship. At some point, the question will have to be put to the Scottish people: do you want to be part of this doomed Brexit deal, or do you want to be an independent nation, making its own way in the world? Imagine if all we could aspire to as a nation was Brexit Britain. Scotland deserves much better than that, and when Scotland gets that opportunity and that choice, Scotland will take advantage of it, and we will be that independent nation—an independent nation within the European Union.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Three-minute limit. I call Joanna Cherry.

6.26 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I rise to support amendment (k), in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford).

The distinguished political journalist Robert Peston has pointed out that the amendment rules out a no-deal Brexit completely, not just on 29 March but in perpetuity, and should therefore be supported by all Opposition Members, including the Labour party, and many Conservative Members. I am delighted that the amendment has the support of Plaid Cymru, and of the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), of the Liberal Democrats, of the Independent Group, and of the Labour party and, I understand, some Members on the Government Benches. I think it shows that there is a majority in this House to rule out no deal completely.

Given that the Government’s own Business Secretary has said that no deal would be ruinous, given what the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) has said about the documents that she has viewed in some detail, and given what the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) said about this not being a game of chicken, supporting the amendment is a no-brainer. I entreat hon. Members across the House to put aside any reservations about the Scottish National party. They may not agree with all our programme. That is fine; that is their right. But there is a majority across this House to rule out no deal, and I ask hon. Members, particularly on the Government Benches, to live up to what they have said across the media and to have the gumption to support this now cross-party amendment, albeit led by the SNP, to rule out no deal completely.

It is simply not true that no deal cannot be ruled out completely. Why would any country want to shoot itself in the foot in that way? It is ruinous, as the Government have said. We can rule out no deal. The reason we can rule out no deal is that even if the European Union did not give us an extension, we have the means to revoke
6.33 pm

[Joanna Cherry]

article 50, thanks to the case that I and others took to the European Court of Justice. I declare my interest in respect of the Good Law Project in that regard.

I entreat hon. Members: today, rather than this being yet another talking shop because certain amendments have been pulled, this is an opportunity to rule out no deal in perpetuity. Those on the Opposition Benches are supporting the amendment. I know that some hon. Members on the Government Benches have said that they will support it. I hope that more will do so, because we can defeat the Government's madness on this tonight.

6.33 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): With 31 days to go, yesterday saw us take the first step back in this House from the precipice towards which we were heading. Had we plunged over the precipice into a no-deal Britain, our country would have been the poorer for a generation. At the next stages, there can be no backsliding on the commitments that have been given, both yesterday and today. The progress made follows sustained cross-party campaigning, exemplified by the excellent leadership of the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman).

In bringing home the consequences of a no-deal Brexit, we have built a powerful business coalition, and their voice could not be clearer. Only yesterday they met here, against the background of already painful consequences being felt, including in our factories, such as Jaguar Land Rover, where thousands of jobs have gone.

The CBI said that it had seen the fastest drop in services since 2008. Barclays was moving £190 million of investment to Dublin. Billions were being spent on contingency planning. The TUC talked of a devastating impact: already thousands—tens of thousands—of workers were losing their jobs. The chief executive of Virgin said that the company had invested £30 billion, and had brought in American investment in particular, but now the company had invested on their businesses. The Investment Association notion of zero tariffs, fearing the impact that it would have on their businesses. The Investment Association talked of the shift of investment to Asia in particular. A major health and safety in transit, but that it did not know what the tariffs could threaten their viability.

The ceramics industry is panic-stricken at hard Brexiteers'. Northern Ireland has now pulled back from that investment. The ceramics industry is panic-stricken at hard Brexiteers'. The Food and Drink Federation in particular, but now the growing uncertainty was leading to investment decisions being taken against Britain. The Food and Drink Federation said that an eighth of its members felt that no deal could threaten their viability.

The National Farmers Union spoke out. From plough to plate, there were grave concerns about the consequences of a no-deal Brexit. Ford said that vehicles were already in transit, but that it did not know what the tariffs would be when they landed. A major health and safety company that was to make a 1,000-strong investment in Northern Ireland has now pulled back from that investment. The ceramics industry is panic-stricken at hard Brexiteers' notion of zero tariffs, fearing the impact that it would have on their businesses. The Investment Association talked of the shift of investment to Asia in particular. A major engineering company said that a £35 million regional headquarters had been shelved.

I could go on, but all I can say in the time available to me is that if we have taken a step back from the brink—and we have—there is no majority in the House, and never will be, for a hard Brexit, a no-deal Brexit. It is therefore crucial for us to come together during the next stages, across parties, as we have done, to frustrate a no-deal Brexit and to agree a new settlement for our country that can command the confidence of the country, and will be in the best interests of the country. We stand ready to undertake that great enterprise, and I hope that all Members will do likewise.

6.36 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): It is easy to ask what has changed since the last debate, and the one before that, and the one before that. I was tempted to talk only about what has changed, because I could quite easily fit “nothing” into four minutes. However, something important has changed. The clock has changed. Cliff-edge day is getting nearer and nearer. The Prime Minister insists that this is not a deliberate, cynical and criminally reckless ploy to run down the clock and blackmail us into voting for a rotten deal as the only alternative to no deal at all. I do not believe that, and I doubt that many other Members in the Chamber do either.

I have been accused tonight of not understanding democratic deficits. I have visited the Dutch Parliament, and I know that Dutch Members of Parliament are able to vote every time a Minister goes to the European Council to tell the Minister how to vote. We are not able to do that. I serve in a Parliament nearly three quarters of whose Members are appointed by patronage and favour, not by democratic mandate. I know about democratic deficits. I have never been alive at a time when my country has voted for a Conservative Government, but Conservative Governments have ruled over me, and misruled over me, for more than half my life. No one in this place is going to tell me, or five and a half million of my fellow Scots, that we do not understand what a democratic deficit means.

I must point out to the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham)—although I do not know whether he is still in the Chamber—that our amendment is not redundant. The Prime Minister has not promised to give us a chance to take no deal off the table. She has offered to give us a chance to take it off the table on 29 March. I want it off the table on 30 March, 31 March, and every day from then till kingdom come. It is not acceptable that the Prime Minister has refused to confirm that that will happen if the House rejects no deal for a second time. We have already rejected it, and it is still on the table. How is that for a democratic deficit?

We have seen so many principles of good government thrown out of the window by a Government who now seem almost to be playing the game that winning a vote is all that matters. It does not matter what is in the vote. It does not matter if they win a vote to take us over a cliff edge, as long as they win it. My hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford)—who I do not think is in the Chamber now—brilliantly described the choice that we are being offered: she said that the Prime Minister’s deal takes us over the cliff edge, but with luck we might have time to knit ourselves a parachute on the way down, before we hit the ground.

This is not a good enough choice. Those who want to force Parliament into such a non-choice are not being democratic. They are seeking to frustrate the clearly expressed will of the House. The House does not want to be forced to choose between a rotten deal and no deal. Some of us have another choice before us. Scotland will never accept the xenophobic, isolationist and divisive future that the Government are trying to force us into. Scotland has an alternative future, and that future will be claimed by the people of Scotland before very long.
6.39 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): One thing I have noticed in the whole debate about Brexit is that small groups with very loud voices tend to dominate, and this afternoon I had a message from a constituent who said:

“Where did it say ‘leave with a deal’ on the referendum paper; it never did—did it?”

There are small groups who think no deal is the way forward but the vast majority of my constituents, many of them among those who voted to leave in 2016, want to leave with a deal that delivers on the promises made in 2016.

I certainly believe it is reckless to leave with no deal, and what the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) said about the negotiations now having gone too far and that no deal should be taken off the table is absolutely right. I welcome the fact that we will have the opportunity to stop a no deal crash-out of the EU in the next few weeks, although very late in the day.

I want to speak briefly to amendment (a). I am pleased that it has been tabled by my Front-Bench team and selected. It is credible; it is a sensible way forward. Of course it opens up the political declaration, but we know that the EU is open to that. It is such a shame, and I feel really let down by the Prime Minister, that over the last two years she has not felt able to act in the national interest and reach out across this House. She has decided on those red lines, it seems, all by herself, agreed with no one but herself. There has been no real attempt to work cross-party.

It could have been so different, and I do think it could have strengthened her hand in her negotiations with the EU if she had had Parliament backing her when she went into those discussions. I also think it would have stopped her suffering the biggest ever defeat in parliamentary history, which happened last month.

Amendment (a) is the best chance to deliver on the promises made to my constituents and everyone else’s constituents in 2016: to protect jobs and trade, and, as an MP representing a university seat, to protect some of our excellent educational schemes such as Erasmus, and also to protect the security of this nation and, finally, the dynamic alignment of rights and protections—which must be, of course, something we all support. So I am pleased that amendment (a) will be voted on this evening and I encourage everybody to get behind it.

6.42 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): There have been a number of excellent contributions to today’s debate from across the House, and while time prevents me from mentioning each of them I do want to single out a number of hon. and right hon. Friends, including my right hon. Friend. The Members for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) and for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), for HMS and Wood Green (Catherine West) and for Pontypridd (Owen Smith), as well as the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) and the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa), who made a particularly passionate contribution.

We find ourselves here again debating much the same issues because we are in an impasse, yet there was little in the Prime Minister’s statement yesterday, or the thoughtful opening speech from the Minister for the Cabinet Office, to suggest that that impasse will be broken any time soon. I think it unlikely but it is of course not inconceivable that the Prime Minister will secure changes to the backstop, yet if she does they will almost certainly be minor, if not entirely cosmetic. They will certainly not be changes of the magnitude necessary to satisfy the very clear instruction set out in the amendment in the name of the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady), supported by the Government, that the Northern Ireland backstop be “replaced with alternative arrangements”.

That highlights the fact that that amendment was merely a sticking plaster which hid all manner of sins in an effort to generate a temporary sense of unity among the warring factions in the Conservative party.

Now it may be that some of the less cavalier members of the European Research Group have realised what a hostage to fortune the Brady amendment was: perhaps they are now looking for a way to climb down; perhaps they are no longer insisting that the backstop be replaced in its entirety and are prepared to consider the type of reassurances that for so long they dismissed. But I would be amazed if they would satisfy both the DUP and all of the ideologues in the ERG. As such, the fundamental issues have not changed and the Government’s present strategy is likely to continue to fail. What is shameful is that the Prime Minister is fully aware of the risks she is taking yet is ploughing on regardless in an attempt to force this House to blink and accept her flawed deal. Is it any wonder that businesses and individuals across the country, many of whom are already feeling the impact of the Prime Minister’s gamble, reacted with alarm at her entirely self-serving and purposefully reckless decision to once again delay a second meaningful vote?

It has long been obvious to many of us on this side of the House that the UK will inevitably have to seek an extension to the article 50 process and postpone exit day beyond 29 March—my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) has said so repeatedly from the Dispatch Box—yet the Prime Minister has insisted repeatedly that the UK will leave the EU on 29 March, no matter what. Yesterday, she was forced to concede that an extension might be necessary after all, and, as the Minister for the Cabinet Office made clear in his opening remarks, we will now have a vote on a binding motion on 14 March if the House rejects the Prime Minister’s revised deal and again rejects a no-deal exit. This is the right thing for the Government to have done, and we will support amendment (f), tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford, if she decides to press it to a vote, to bind the Government to those commitments.

We on this side of the House will support any and all efforts to prevent a damaging no-deal departure from the EU, including supporting amendment (k), tabled by the Scottish National party. Providing for a means to reduce the time pressure in the article 50 process does not ensure that a no-deal exit is ruled out categorically as an option, but it is a crucial first step in preventing a no-deal exit from happening, either inadvertently or as a matter of intent. However, as my right hon. Friend the
Member of Wolverhampton South East and my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd stated in their powerful contributions, the EU will agree to an extension only if it is for a purpose, and that purpose cannot be more of the strategy that the Prime Minister has adhered to in the 43 days since 15 January. That is why it is almost inevitable that this House will have to explore credible alternatives to the Prime Minister’s deal that might be capable of commanding a majority in this House.

We have set out our alternative in amendment (a), and we know that it is a credible alternative because the EU has said as much, privately and publicly. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras exposed forensically in his opening remarks, it is very different from the political declaration and we know that it is a credible alternative because the UK to carve out the citizens’ rights deal? If so, when?

I want to end my remarks, as my right hon. and learned Friend ended his, by underlining the commitment made by the Leader of the Opposition on Monday. If amendment (a) is defeated this evening, Labour will then move to propose or support future public vote amendments in Parliament that offer the British people a choice between a credible leave option endorsed by this House and the option of staying in the EU. As my right hon. and learned Friend made clear, we will do that because we have to, in order to prevent a damaging Tory Brexit of the kind that the Prime Minister is proposing and to avert a disastrous no-deal exit.

6.48 pm

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): The Government’s focus is on securing a deal and passing a meaningful vote by 12 March. The Prime Minister has now spoken to the leaders of all 27 EU member states to set out the UK’s position. The Attorney General, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and I have been engaged in discussions with the EU to make progress, and both teams are continuing their work. We have agreed to review progress with the EU again over the coming days.

Alberto Costa: I have two questions for my right hon. Friend. Given that the Government have accepted my amendment in full, will he confirm at the Dispatch Box whether the Prime Minister will be writing to President Tusk and the European Council requesting that the European Council give legal authority to the EU Commission to seek to enter into discussions with the UK to carve out the citizens’ rights deal? If so, when?

Stephen Barclay: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point. Many Members from across the House spoke in support of his amendment and I am happy to confirm that we will write to the EU institutions in the coming days. The reality is that we have a shared goal of protecting citizens’ rights, and the Government do not oppose my hon. Friend’s amendment for that reason, but the issue is more about what the European side is willing to do, because the EU has previously said that it is a bilateral matter for member states, rather than something within the EU Commission’s mandate.

Turning to amendment (c) in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), she kindly referred to my remarks in the media this morning, and those of the Prime Minister, that the will of the House will be respected in respect of a vote on whether to leave with no deal should the meaningful vote on 12 March not be passed. I am grateful to her for indicating, in the light of the assurances that we have provided, that she does not intend to press the amendment to a vote.

Moving on to amendment (f) in the name of the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), I can confirm that the Government will accept it. It is no longer necessary, because we have made clear commitments to hold a second meaningful vote on 12 March and another vote on leaving without a deal. The Chairman of the Exiting the European Union Committee asked whether those motions would be amendable, and that was addressed by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. As the Chairman of the Committee well knows, it is for you, Mr Speaker, to decide whether a motion is amendable, but the Government are happy to give a commitment subject to that decision. I do not want to pre-empt what the motion will say, but we expect that a substantive motion would be amendable, which I hope reassures him.

Going back to amendment (c), the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford and the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) asked me to confirm the Government’s position on the record and to reiterate the position set out by the Prime Minister, who said:

“First, we will hold a second meaningful vote by Tuesday 12 March at the latest. Secondly, if the Government have not won a meaningful vote by Tuesday 12 March, then they will, in addition to their obligations to table a neutral, amendable motion under section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, table a motion to be voted on by Wednesday 13 March, at the latest, asking this House if it supports leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement and a framework for a future relationship on 29 March. So the United Kingdom will only leave without a deal on 29 March if there is explicit consent in this House for that outcome.

Thirdly, if the House, having rejected leaving with the deal negotiated with the EU, then rejects leaving on 29 March without a withdrawal agreement and future framework, the Government will, on 14 March, bring forward a motion on whether Parliament wants to seek a short, limited extension to article 50, and, if the House votes for an extension, seek to agree that extension approved by the House with the EU and bring forward the necessary legislation to change the exit date commensurate with that extension. These commitments all fit the timescale set out in the private Member’s Bill in the name of the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford.”—[Official Report, 26 February 2019; Vol. 655, c. 166-167.]

Those commitments were made by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, and the Government will stick by them. While I do not normally like to read text out verbatim, I hope that that provides the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford with the clarification that she was seeking.
Yvette Cooper: There are some reports online that the Leader of the House may have said something different and that there might be circumstances in which we could leave with no deal even if the House had voted against that. Is the Brexit Secretary aware of that?

Stephen Barclay: As the right hon. Lady knows, I have been sat in the Chamber for the vast majority of the debate, so I do not know about any such comments. The reason why I was so explicit in what I set out and in repeating what the Prime Minister said—and indeed why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster was so clear in what he said—is that that is the Government position, and I hope that the right hon. Lady will take things in that spirit. Obviously, I do not know what other comments have been made, but I am happy to confirm the Prime Minister’s comments at the Dispatch Box.

In introducing amendment (a), in the name of the Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. and learned Gentleman was being too modest, because over the past two weeks something material has changed: the position of the Leader of the Opposition. Two weeks ago we thought he was honouring the referendum and honouring his manifesto commitment, whereas we now learn that he is committed to a second referendum.

The Leader of the Opposition started out with six tests, and he now wants five commitments. His five commitments relate to the political declaration, but he uses them to justify not voting for the withdrawal agreement, even though that withdrawal agreement includes protecting citizens’ rights, honouring our international obligations and protecting the Northern Ireland border, all of which he calls for. Indeed, he says he wants to be part of the single market but, at the same time, he wants not to be part of state aid rules or freedom of movement, which shows all the consistency we are familiar with from the Leader of the Opposition.

Amendment (k) expresses the SNP’s discontent with no deal, regardless of whether we extend article 50. I do not think we need a vote in this House to understand that the SNP is discontented—we can probably take that as read.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) raised the issue of alternative arrangements, and I am happy to confirm that the UK and the EU have agreed to consider a joint work stream to develop alternative arrangements to ensure no hard border on the island of Ireland. We will also be setting up domestic structures to take advice from external experts, from businesses that trade with the EU and beyond, and from colleagues across the House. That will be supported by civil service resources and £20 million of Government funding. The work will be done in parallel, without prejudice to the ongoing negotiations.

Mr Baron: The Secretary of State knows we wish him well with these negotiations, but can he confirm that, when it comes to addressing the concerns of Conservative Members and some Opposition Members about the backstop, what is achieved will not only be meaningful but have a cast-iron guarantee of legal force?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend has exquisite timing, as I was just about to namecheck him. In addition to referring to the fact that we need to address the indefinite nature of the backstop, he spoke of the need for compromise. He reflected one of the themes of today’s debate, which is that, among those who voted remain and among those who voted leave, there is consensus in this House on recognising the importance of securing a deal. The best way to mitigate the risk of no deal is to have a deal. Indeed, as the Prime Minister frequently says at this Dispatch Box, the only way to avoid a no deal is either to revoke Brexit entirely, a betrayal of the votes of 17.4 million people, or to secure a deal.

We have listened to Members across the House, and we have listened to their concerns about no deal. We have clearly said to Members across the House that there will be a vote in this place on the issue of no deal. However, in securing a deal, which is our priority, we will protect the rights of EU citizens, along with the wishes of my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa), not only in the EU but in the UK, and we will do so in a way that delivers Brexit and delivers on the biggest vote in our country’s history. That is why I commend the approach set out in the motion.

Amendment proposed: (a), leave out from “House” to end and add:

“instructs Ministers
(a) to negotiate with the EU for changes to the Political Declaration to secure:

i. a permanent and comprehensive customs union with the EU;
ii. close alignment with the single market underpinned by shared institutions and obligations;
iii. dynamic alignment on rights and protections;
iv. commitments on participation in EU agencies and funding programmes, including in areas such as the environment, education, and industrial regulation; and
v. unambiguous agreement on the detail of future security arrangements, including access to the European Arrest Warrant and vital shared databases; and

(b) to introduce primary legislation to give statutory effect to this negotiating mandate.”.—[Jeremy Corbyn.]”.

The House divided: Ayes 240, Noes 323.

Division No. 345] [6.59 pm

AYES

Abbott, Rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carden, Dan
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
NOES

Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carling, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davies, rh Mr David

Tellers for the Ayes:

Nic Dakin and Bambos Charalambous
Amendment proposed: (k), in line 1, leave out from “House” to end and add—

“is determined not to leave the European Union without a withdrawal agreement and future framework under any circumstances, and regardless of any exit date.”—[Ian Blackford.]

Question put, That the amendment be made.
### Division No. 346

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UK’s Withdrawal from the EU

27 FEBRUARY 2019

Tellers for the Ayes: Marion Fellows and David Linden

NOES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Aintree, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Austin, Ian
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Barron, Sir Christopher
Barron, Sir David
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Berridge, rh Sir James
Berry, Jake
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Connor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cardidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chi, Shih Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, Richard
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleaverney, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinnenage, Caroline
Djankogly, Mr Jonathan
Dockerty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Mrs Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Frank
Field, rh Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, rh Caroline
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, rh Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffiths, Andrew
Hair, Kirstene
Hafon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr David
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hoey, Kate
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, rh Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Hudsonston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkins, Sir Bernard
Jenksy, Andrea
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Liddington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, KIt
Mann, John
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVeigh, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Patzon, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Perry, Andrew
Philip, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Presi, Victoria
Prisk, rh Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
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Question accordingly negatived.

Mr Speaker: We come now to amendment (c) in the name of the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman).

Dame Caroline Spelman: Not moved.

Amendment made: (b), at end, add

“(c) and requires the Prime Minister to seek at the earliest opportunity a joint UK-EU commitment to adopt part two of the Withdrawal Agreement on Citizens’ Rights and ensure its implementation prior to the UK’s exiting the European Union, whatever the outcome of negotiations on other aspects of the Withdrawal Agreement.”—[Alberto Costa.]”

Amendment proposed: (f), at end, add

“(c) and further notes in particular the commitment of the Prime Minister made in this House to hold a second meaningful vote by 12 March and if the House, having rejected leaving with the deal negotiated with the EU, then rejects leaving on 29 March without a withdrawal agreement and future framework, the Government will, on 14 March, bring forward a motion on whether Parliament wants to seek a short limited extension to Article 50, and if the House votes for an extension, seek to agree that extension approved by the House with the EU, and bring forward the necessary legislation to change the exit date commensurate with that extension.”—[Yvette Cooper.]”

Question put, That the amendment be made.


Division No. 347  [7.29 pm]

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Adams, Nigel
Afzal, Bim
Aldous, Peter
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Andrew, Stuart
Antoniacci, Tonia
Argar, Edward
Ashworth, Jonathan
Atkins, Victoria
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Stephen
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Bebb, Guto
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Benyon, rh Richard
Berry, Jake
Betts, Dr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Boles, Nick
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Brabin, Tracy
Bradley, rh Karen
Bradhshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brereton, Jack
Brine, Steve
Brock, Deidre
Brokenshire, rh James
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Buckland, Robert
Burden, Richard
Burghart, Alex
Burton, rh Alistair
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Cairns, rh Alun
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Carlidge, James
Chalk, Alex
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Cherry, Joanna
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Collin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costa, Alberto
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Crudging, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh Mr David
Day, Martyn
De Cordero, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Debono, Thangam
Dent, Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tammanjeet Singh
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dockerty, Leo
Dockerty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Donelan, Michelle
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Dowden, Oliver
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellis, Michael
Elman, Dame Louise
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Eustice, George
Evans, Chris
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Field, rh Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fovargue, Yvonne
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Frith, James
Gaffney, Hugh
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Gapes, Mike

Tellers for the Noes:
Amanda Milling and
Craig Whittaker

453 454
Gardiner, Barry
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Ghani, Mr Nasrur
Gibb, rh Nick
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glen, John
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Grady, Patrick
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, rh Damian
Green, Kate
Greening, rh Justine
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwyne, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Haigh, Louis
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hamilton, Fabian
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Carolyn
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hendry, Drew
Herbert, rh Nick
Hermion, Lady
Hill, Mike
Hiller, Meg
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hollering, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Howell, John
Hudson, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Hussain, Imran
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Javid, rh Saajid
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Mr Marcus
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keep, Stephen
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kennedy, Seema
Khan, Afzal
Kilren, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Knight, Julian
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Karen
Lee, rh Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leslie, rh Mr Chris
Lettwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Liddington, rh Mr David
Linden, David
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lopresti, Jack
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly (Proxy vote cast by Mark Tami)
Maclean, Rachel
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Mak, Alan
Malhotra, Seema
Mallender, Kit
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Masterton, Paul
Matheson, Christian
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Sicobhan
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinney, Catherine
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McMahon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, rh Mrsillian
Milling, Amanda
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moore, Damien
Moran, Layla
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Neill, Robert
Newlands, Gavin
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Norris, Alex
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
O'Hara, Brendan
O'Mara, Jared
Onn, Melanie
Onsurah, Chi
Opperman, Guy
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Pawsey, Mark
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Pennycook, Matthew
Penrose, John
Perkins, Toby
Perry, rh Claire
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Philip, Chris
Piddock, Laura
Pincher, rh Christopher
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pound, Stephen
Pow, Rebecca
Powell, Lucy
Prentis, Victoria
Pritchard, Mark
Quin, Jeremy
Qureshi, Yarmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Robinson, Mary
Rodd, Matt
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Danielle
Ruddy, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Rutley, David
Ryan, rh Joan
Sandbach, Antoinette
Saville Roberts, Liz
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selsou, Andrew
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Lok
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Shelbrooke, Alec
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip (Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft)
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Angela
Smith, Edward
Smith, Jeff
Smith, rh Julia
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Sobel, Alex
Soubry, rh Anna
Spellar, rh John
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevens, Jo
Stevenson, John
UK’s Withdrawal from the EU  27 FEBRUARY 2019

Business without Debate

JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE DRAFT DOMESTIC ABUSE BILL

Resolved,

That it is expedient that a Joint Committee of Lords and Commons be appointed to consider and report on the draft Domestic Abuse Bill (CP 15) presented to both Houses on Monday 21 January 2019.

That a Select Committee of six Members be appointed to join with any committee to be appointed by the Lords for this purpose; that the Committee should report on the draft Bill by Friday 17 May.

That the Committee shall have power:

(i) to send for persons, papers and records;
(ii) to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House;
(iii) to report from time to time;
(iv) to appoint specialist advisers; and
(v) to adjourn from place to place within the United Kingdom.

That the quorum of the Committee shall be two; and

That Diana Johnson, Gillian Keegan, Mrs Maria Miller, Alex Norris, Helen Whately and Dr Philippa Whitford be members of the Committee.—[Iain Stewart.]
I simply posit to the right hon. Gentleman that the scenario is not entirely to be taken for granted, for it rests upon the premise that very large numbers of Members, united by their commitment to and, dare I say it, even their adoration of the right hon. Gentleman, are so utterly distraught that he is not yet present in his place, but confident that he will shortly be, that they wish to aid and abet him in what they hope will be a fruitful endeavour by him. That is quite an assumption. They could make that attempt, and if the Chair were in a benevolent mood, the Chair could legitimately accommodate their efforts. I hope that the curiosity of the right hon. Gentleman has now been satisfied—at least for tonight.

If there are no further points of order, either from the right hon. Gentleman or from any other hon. or right hon. Member, we come now to the petitions.

PETITIONS
Closure of Oldham Post Office

7.53 pm
Jim McMahon: On behalf of myself, my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), I present the petition of the residents of Oldham. Over 3,100 people object to the proposed closure of Oldham Crown post office and its relocation to WH Smith. Oldham post office is the borough’s last remaining Crown post office, serving a population of 235,000 people and over 6,000 businesses, and its current location is vital for the vibrancy of the market hall and the surviving businesses, as well as being easily accessible for those who use public transport and those with limited mobility.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the Government, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and Post Office Ltd to think again about the decision to close Oldham Post Office and to ensure that the consultation is genuine with the real concerns we have fully taken on board.

Following is the full text of the Petition:

[The petition of residents of Oldham, declares that we object to the proposal by Post Office Ltd to close our main Crown post office in Oldham town centre and relocate it to WH Smith; further that the proposed closure from its High Street location and relocation to WH Smith in Spindles/Town Square shopping centre is a nonsense as evident to anyone who uses the post office; further that the post office is a busy branch and well used; further that there is no public interest in closing it; further that even if some services will be relocated, services, staff and our high street will be compromised; further that not only will we lose a visible institution on our high street, the experience of post office services in WH Smiths tells us that it will be smaller, queues will be longer and services will be reduced.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and Post Office Ltd to think again about the decision to close Oldham Post Office and to ensure that the consultation is genuine with the real concerns we have fully taken on board.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

Gibraltar representation in the Houses of Parliament, Westminster

7.55 pm
Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I am greatly obliged to you, Mr Speaker, for calling me to present my first petition this evening, which was given to me today by the Representation in Westminster group from the British overseas territory of Gibraltar.

As you will know, Mr Speaker, the people of Gibraltar are proudly British, and they would like to be represented in this place as all British citizens expect to be. They have collected this chunky petition, which bears no fewer than 14,000 signatures, 11,200 of which are those of Gibraltar citizens. That represents 68% of the electorate of Gibraltar. They will be losing their representation by Members of the European Parliament, so they feel that the time has come for them to have their own Member of Parliament here in the sovereign Parliament of our United Kingdom. The petition is supported by the Chief Minister of Gibraltar, Fabian Picardo, and the Deputy Chief Minister, Joseph Garcia.

It reads as follows:

The petition of British Citizens of Gibraltar, declares that it is a fundamental right of ours to representation in the Houses of Parliament, Westminster.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to grant Gibraltar representation in the Houses of Parliament, Gibraltar.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[Havering, and leaving the European Union

7.57 pm
Andrew Rosindell: A further petition has been handed to me by the residents of the London borough of Havering. It relates to Britain’s departure from the European Union. You will know, Mr Speaker, that 70% of Havering residents voted to leave the EU, and that that was one of the largest votes to leave in the country. The petition, which is addressed to the honourable Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland Parliament assembled, reads as follows:

The Humble Petition of Lawrence Webb and the citizens of the London Borough of Havering,

Sheweth,

That in 1975 the British people, in a referendum, agreed to remain members of a Common Market, a group of equal and free European Nations trading together without barriers and tariffs. By default, the British people have, without their consent, become citizens of a European State run by a non-elected bureaucratic Commission in Brussels. This foreign power has suborned our legal system and the authority of our Parliament.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House do all in its power to re-establish our sovereign right to rule ourselves in accordance with the freedoms, liberties and rights granted to us and our heirs forever under Magna Carta 1215 and the Bill of Rights 1689, and that we leave the European Union, the Customs Union, the Single Market and that we end Free Movement of People on 29th March, 2019 as set out in law under the European Withdrawal Act 2018.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, etc.
Dental Health: Older People

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Iain Stewart.)

7.59 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): This Adjournment debate provides an opportunity to discuss a very important but often overlooked issue, which can have a major impact on the wellbeing of older people: their oral health. Many of us will have older relatives who have reached the stage where they need some extra support. It might be that they live in a residential care home, have a carer who visits them in their home a couple of times a week, or just require a bit of extra help from us personally to stay independent.

However, one issue that often slips under the radar when we think about an older relative's needs is their oral health; it can often seem like a small issue, but in fact poor oral health can have much wider implications. Having a painful oral health problem can impact on someone’s ability to eat comfortably, to speak and to socialise with confidence, and on the ease with which they can take medication, something which may be a particular issue if an older person is living with other long-term health conditions. Maintaining good oral health can also become much more challenging for older people with reduced dexterity, who may for example have more difficulty with brushing their teeth. Furthermore, for the most vulnerable older people, such as those with dementia, who may have difficulty communicating where they are experiencing pain, an oral health problem can be especially distressing.

Ensuring that older people are supported to maintain good oral health, and have access to dental services when they need them, is therefore very important. However, while data on this issue is limited, the information that we do have suggests that these are areas in which we often fall short.

The Faculty of Dental Surgery of the Royal College of Surgeons published a report on “Improving older people’s oral health” in 2017, which estimated that 1.8 million people aged 65 and over in England, Wales and Northern Ireland could have an urgent dental condition such as dental pain, oral sepsis or extensive untreated decay. Moreover, the Faculty of Dental Surgery also highlighted that this number could increase to 2.7 million by 2040 as a result of several demographic factors, thereby increasing pressure on dental services in the future. As well as the ageing nature of Britain’s population, increasing numbers of people are also retaining their natural teeth into old age; while this is good news, it also means that dental professionals are facing new challenges as they have to provide increasingly complex treatment to teeth that may already have been heavily restored.

Separately, in 2014 Public Health England published the findings of research looking at oral health services for dependent older people in north-west England, which found that access to domiciliary and emergency dental care can often be very challenging for those living in residential care homes or receiving “care in your home” support services. More recently, Public Health England last year published the results of a national oral health survey of dependent older people living in supported housing. This revealed that nearly 70% of respondents had visible plaque and 61% had visible tartar, indicators of poor oral hygiene, and that in some parts of the country, such as County Durham and Ealing, over a quarter of dependent older people would be unable to visit a dentist and so required domiciliary care in their home.

It is difficult to get a complete up-to-date picture of the oral health needs of older people across the country, partly because there has not been an adult dental health survey for 10 years, an issue I will return to later. However, these figures, as well as anecdotal reports from dental professionals working on the frontline, suggest there is a real issue here which potentially impacts on large numbers of often vulnerable older people.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this important issue to the House. As he said, 1.8 million elderly people across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland have problems, which is shocking. The hon. Gentleman outlined some of the solutions such as extra attention on domiciliary care and in residential homes, and for those at home and dependent on carers. Does he agree that older people’s confidence can also be diminished by not having their teeth correctly done? My mother went this week to have her teeth done; she is 87 years of age and she depends very much on her dentist. She has attended over the years, but many have not, and we need to have that care at all those different levels.

Andrew Selous: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving us his personal family experience of this issue.

There have been some welcome developments over the last few months, including the recently published NHS long-term plan highlighting oral health as one of the priorities for NHS England as it rolls out a new “Enhanced health in care homes” programme across the country. However, I would like to draw the Minister’s attention to five particular areas in which more could usefully be done: training for health and social care professionals; access to dental services; data; regulation; and the social care Green Paper.

First, on training, health and social care professionals regularly do a brilliant job of caring for older people, but as I have mentioned, oral health is one issue that can easily fall between the cracks, particularly if someone is living with a range of other health conditions that also require care and attention. One example of this is oral care plans. Ideally, whenever someone is admitted as a resident to a care home, their oral health needs should be considered as part of their initial health assessment. Those needs should then be reflected in an oral care plan that all their carers are aware of and that will, for example, set out whether the resident needs extra help brushing their teeth.

There is some good guidance from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, but this can often be overlooked. In Public Health England’s research in north-west England, 57% of residential care home managers said that they did not have an oral care policy, and one in 10 said that an oral health assessment was not undertaken at the start of care provision. Knowing how to provide good oral care is especially important when it comes to supporting those with more complex needs. For example, for those with dementia, electric toothbrushes can sometimes be quite intimidating.
and it makes a big difference if a carer knows that they should use a manual toothbrush when helping with tooth brushing. More broadly, if someone who is living with dementia refuses oral care, this can become an obstacle to maintaining good oral health, so it is important that carers understand how to manage these situations, ideally with input from a dental care professional.

Equally, for those with dentures, it is important that training and procedures are in place to minimise the risk of a denture getting lost, even if this is a simple thing such as ensuring that they are kept in a jar by the bedside when not in use. A lost denture takes weeks to replace, and this can be a devastating experience for an older person who relies on them to eat and speak. This is particularly sensitive if someone is coming to the end of their life, when it may not be possible to manufacture a replacement in time as they spend their remaining days with loved ones. An understanding of good denture care is particularly important in these situations.

Improving awareness of oral health among health and care professionals should therefore be a priority, and was a key recommendation in the Faculty of Dental Surgery’s 2017 report. This highlighted schemes such as the Mouth Care Matters programme, in which mouth care leads are recruited to provide oral care training to staff in hospitals and care homes, and I would be interested to know from the Minister whether there were any plans to replicate such initiatives nationwide.

Secondly, ensuring that older people can access dental services when they need them is essential. It is not uncommon for people to think that if someone has no teeth, they cannot be experiencing pain or other oral problems. Sadly, this is not the case and they should still have an oral check-up once a year, not least because the majority of cases of oral cancer occur in people over 50. There are all too many tragic instances of an older person being diagnosed with oral cancer too late—the saddest two words in the English language—simply because they had not seen a dentist in a number of years. Attending a dental appointment can be a particular challenge for those with reduced mobility—for example, if they are unable to climb stairs to reach a dental practice on the first floor—in which case, domiciliary visits are vital. However, evidence suggests that access to domiciliary dental care can be challenging, particularly for those living in care homes or supported housing, and I would appreciate the Minister’s thoughts on how we can address this.

In 2015, Healthwatch Bolton reported that it was easier for a local care home resident to get access to a hairdresser than to a dentist. In 2016, Healthwatch Kent reported that care homes had told it about accessibility problems for wheelchair users within dental practices. In 2016, Healthwatch Lancashire reported that care home staff said:

“The residents don’t get regular checks; they are only seen when there is a problem.”

Healthwatch Derby was concerned about the lack of information for social care providers about how to access dental services for their residents. While the commitment in the NHS long-term plan to “ensure that individuals are supported to have good oral health” in care homes under the “Enhanced health in care homes” section is welcome, there is no mention of a similar commitment for older people who use domiciliary care agencies. Those people should not be forgotten, so what do the Government intend to do about that for domiciliary care agency users under the NHS long-term plan?

Thirdly, the intelligence around older people’s oral health is quite limited, making it difficult to build a full picture of the level of need or assess the barriers that older people face in accessing dental care. The most immediate action that could be taken to address that would be for the Government to commission a new adult dental health survey. It is one of the few resources to provide detailed, national-level data on standards of oral health among older people, and it is a key reference for many commissioners, policy makers and dental professionals. The survey has been conducted every 10 years since 1968, but the last edition was published in 2009, so a new one is due. However, the Government have yet to give any indication of when or if a new survey will be taking place, which is causing increasing concern within the dental profession, so an update on that would be most welcome.

There are other steps that would help to improve our understanding of such issues. For example, NHS Digital publishes a regular set of NHS dental statistics for England, which reports on the proportion of children aged zero to 17 who attended an NHS dentist in the preceding 12 months, as well as the proportion of adults aged 18 and over who attended an NHS dentist in the past two years. That data provides a useful measure of access, and expanding the figures to include attendance rates for older people would help us to develop a clearer picture of whether there are particular groups or areas where access to an NHS dentist is a problem.

Jim Shannon: Many elderly people are independent and proud, and one of the things that puts them off attending the dentist—I see this in my constituency—is that they think they have to pay for the treatment, but they do not. Perhaps we need to put out a reminder about that.

Andrew Selous: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for putting that on the record.

Fourthly, in addition to health services, care home providers and dental professionals, regulators can play an essential role by monitoring standards of oral care and driving improvements. The Care Quality Commission in England does not explicitly look at oral health during its inspections of hospitals and care homes, although I understand that it is doing a lot of work behind the scenes to try and push that on to the agenda for care providers, which is obviously welcome. Health and care regulators in other parts of the UK can also make a valuable contribution to ensuring that the importance of oral health is recognised by those that they inspect.

Lastly, I continue to look forward to the publication of the Government’s long-awaited social care Green Paper. Given the importance of oral health to our wider health and wellbeing, an all-encompassing model of care for older people must include dental services, so it will be important that the Green Paper clearly sets out how social care and dental services can work together in the future and what more can be done to ensure that older people have access to dental services when they need them. As I have mentioned, one of the most valuable things we can do to improve older people’s oral health is to ensure that it is not overlooked amid the
many other issues that we are dealing with, and I hope that the Government will show leadership on that in the Green Paper.

Oral health can sometimes seem like a small issue, but it has a significant impact on quality of life. The Minister will be aware that we have spoken a lot in recent years about the need to improve children’s oral health, and quite rightly so, but it is also essential that we do not take our eye off the other groups who need support. For an older person who is in pain because of an oral health problem, finding it difficult to eat or speak, or who may be distressed at the loss of a denture that will take weeks to replace, such issues are very real. We can all contribute to addressing them, including Members who care for older relatives in our everyday lives. Indeed, the Faculty of Dental Surgery published some useful advice over Christmas about using visits to older relatives as an opportunity to check their oral health and for how to spot the signs that they might have an oral health problem. That is something that Members could do over Easter when visiting elderly relatives, and we could encourage our constituents to do the same. However, I hope that the Minister will recognise that Government also have an important role to play and will look carefully at what can be done to help improve oral care for our older people.

8.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): I realise that a debate on older people’s dental health is merely of passing interest to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, as you are many years from it being of direct interest, but I hope you enjoy my response.

I congratulate my good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), on securing time for this debate and on setting out his case so clearly. I will do my best to answer his points in the time available. As he knows, I will write to him on anything I do not answer.

Oral health has improved significantly over the 40 years that I have been alive. At the start of the NHS—it is worth noting this incredible statistic—40% of the population had no natural teeth. The figure is now—answers on a postcard—6%. These massive improvements are to be celebrated but, of course, with improvements come new challenges.

As we are all aware, older people—we categorise those aged over 65 as older people for the purpose of this conversation—make up an increasingly large proportion of the population. By 2032, we project there will be 13.5 million people aged 65 and over in our country. Older people are retaining far more teeth, often heavily filled, than previous generations. As people age, so do their fillings, and all the other bits of their bodies, and ongoing restorative work is needed.

Many older people live independently and are in full charge of their oral health, as are working-age adults, but we recognise that frail older people—those with additional needs, often living in care homes or supported to remain at home, as my hon. Friend set out—can face real barriers to accessing the appropriate care and support they need to maintain good oral and dental health.
We should also recognise and highlight the ongoing work of NHS England and Public Health England, which I sponsor within my portfolio, to improve the oral health of vulnerable older people. As is referred to in the long-term plan, NHS England considers oral health for older people, particularly those in care homes who may be vulnerable, an important issue. I have asked also to be kept updated on progress as NHS England takes forward action on this and other areas highlighted in the plan.

Public Health England has published “Commissioning better oral health for vulnerable older people”—a snappy title—which is designed to support commissioners of services to improve the oral health of vulnerable older adults so that they can lead a healthy, long and meaningful life outside the acute sector. My hon. Friend highlighted the Mouth Care Matters programme, which, as he says, is a local training initiative from Health Education England offering support and training in oral healthcare for the elderly and for hospital staff looking after patients who may need help with mouth care. I know the programme has been very successful locally in Kent, Surrey and Sussex. Decisions on whether to extend the training more widely are for HEE, but I would hope the success of the programme to date means that HEE is able to take it forward to new areas in the longer term, including to his county. I cannot give the nationwide answer that he asked for in his speech, but I suggest that the early signs are positive.

On access to dental services currently, NHS England is legally responsible for commissioning services to meet local identified need, and that includes the commissioning of domiciliary care services, where appropriate. However, it is important to say that where residents can, the care home and the local NHS work together, often very successfully, to ensure that dental services are provided in the most appropriate setting for those residents, whether that is within the care home itself or in a dental practice, or provided by the community dental service. Often people in care home settings will enjoy the trip out to the dentist; it is part of their socialisation and their routine, and we should not overlook that.

I note my hon. Friend’s concerns about the availability of oral health data, particularly for the older age groups. I agree that the adult dental health survey is an important tool for understanding oral health changes over time. I can reassure him that although there is not yet a date set for the next survey, no decision has been taken to discontinue this important source of information. I take this debate as a bit of a nudge to ask more questions about this. If my hon. Friend looks at my track record, for example, on the cancer patient experience survey, which I was clear was an important tool to give me information about cancer patients’ experience, he will see that I place value on such patient health surveys. In the shorter term, I agree that the regularly published NHS dental statistics on numbers of people seeing an NHS dentist could provide more helpful information by analysing the data by age. I am going to ask my officials to work with NHS England and NHS Digital to pursue this further, and I will ensure that my hon. Friend is kept informed on that point.

My hon. Friend made a point about the social care Green Paper, which remains very much a priority but is not yet in reach. The Green Paper will cover a range of issues that are common to all adults with care and support needs, and will bring forward proposals to ensure that we have a social care system in which people know that the care they receive will help them to maintain their independence and wellbeing, and that we have a social care system that we can be proud of. We will publish the document shortly, and it will set out proposals to reform the adult care system. I take the points made by my hon. Friend about the importance of including dental and oral health in the Green Paper. I will make sure that a copy of this remarks is sent to the Minister for Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage).

In the remaining few minutes, I wish to touch on the prevention Green Paper. We set out our prevention strategy last year, and it is one of the Secretary of State’s three priorities. We are now in the process of developing the prevention Green Paper, which is an exciting piece of work with which to be involved. It will be called “Prevention is better than cure” and will do exactly what it says on the tin. I will engage with key dental stakeholders—including the British Dental Association, Mr Deputy Speaker, so there is no need to tweet me—in the coming weeks. I look forward to those engagements.

In conclusion, although I am disappointed not to have heard from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) during my speech, I know he has already intervened, and I am pleased that we have had the opportunity to discuss these issues. I think this is the first time I have responded to an Adjournment debate on this subject, and I have responded to quite a few. I hope I have been able to demonstrate the Government’s commitment to improving oral health. Of course there is more to do, and that commitment absolutely includes work on the oral health of older people in care homes, as set out in the long-term plan, and in domiciliary care settings. Our plans to engage in the coming weeks with key dental stakeholders on the development of the prevention Green Paper are honest and sincerely meant. I will continue to watch the work of the CQC and the outputs of its report with interest, and I will follow up on the dental survey so that we have the key data we need to improve services for the people we are here for—our constituents.

Question put and agreed to.

8.26 pm

House adjourned.
Deferred Divisions

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS)

That the draft Official Listing of Securities Prospectus and Transparency (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 21 January, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 317, Noes 280.

Division No. 339]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davies, Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donaldson, Sir Jeffrey

Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Dornies, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Downing, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drux, Richard
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Duguid, David
Duncan, Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, Mr Iain
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Evennett, Mr Sir David
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May, Mr Mrs Theresa
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McVey, Mr Ms Esther
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Moore, Damien
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Robertson, Mr Laurence
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Ross, Douglas
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Sandbach, Antoinette
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<tr>
<td>Hardy, Emma</td>
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<tr>
<td>Harman, rh Ms Harriet</td>
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<tr>
<td>Harris, Carolyn</td>
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<td>Hayes, Helen</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hayman, Sue</td>
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<tr>
<td>Healey, rh John</td>
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<td>Hendrick, Sir Mark</td>
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<td>Hill, Mike</td>
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<td>Hillier, Meg</td>
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<td>Howarth, rh Mr George</td>
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<td>Huq, Dr Rupa</td>
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<td>Johnson, Diana</td>
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<td>Jones, Darren</td>
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<td>Jones, Gerald</td>
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<td>Jones, Graham P.</td>
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<td>Jones, Helen</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jones, rh Mr Kevan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jones, Sarah</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jones, Susan Elan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kane, Mike</td>
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<td>Keeley, Barbara</td>
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<td>Kendall, Liz</td>
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<td>Khan, Afzal</td>
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<td>Kinnock, Stephen</td>
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<td>Lake, Ben</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lammy, rh Mr David</td>
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<td>Lavery, Ian</td>
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<td>Law, Chris</td>
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<td>Lee, Karen</td>
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<td>Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma</td>
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<td>Lewis, Clive</td>
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<td>Lewis, Mr Ivan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Linden, David</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lloyd, Tony</td>
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<td>Long Bailey, Rebecca</td>
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<td>Lucas, Caroline</td>
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<td>Lucas, Ian C.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lynch, Holly (Proxy vote cast by Mark Tami)</td>
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<td>MacNeil, Angus Brendan</td>
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<td>Malhotra, Seema</td>
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<td>Mc Nally, John</td>
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<tr>
<td>McDonnell, rh John</td>
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<td>McFadden, rh Mr Pat</td>
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<td>McGinn, Conor</td>
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<td>Miliband, rh Edward</td>
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<td>Monaghan, Carol</td>
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<td>Moon, Mrs Madeleine</td>
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<td>Moran, Layla</td>
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<td>Morden, Jessica</td>
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<td>Morgan, Stephen</td>
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<td>Morris, Grahame</td>
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<td>Murray, Ian</td>
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<td>Nandy, Lisa</td>
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<td>Newlands, Gavin</td>
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<td>Norris, Alex</td>
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<td>O’Hara, Brendan</td>
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<td>Onn, Melanie</td>
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<td>Onwurah, Chi</td>
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<td>Osamor, Kate</td>
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<td>Owen, Albert</td>
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<td>Peacock, Stephanie</td>
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<td>Pearce, Teresa</td>
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<td>Perkins, Toby</td>
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<td>Phillipson, Bridget</td>
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<td>Pidcock, Laura</td>
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<td>Platt, Jo</td>
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<td>Qureshi, Yasmin</td>
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<td>Rashid, Faisal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rayner, Angela</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reed, Mr Steve</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rees, Christina</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reeves, Ellie</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reeves, Rachel</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Deferred Divisions

27 FEBRUARY 2019

Deferred Divisions

Reynolds, Emma
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rodda, Matt
Roylton, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Snell, Gareth
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Smyth, Karin
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Smith, Nick
Ruane, Chris
Sheppard, Tommy
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Jo
Smith, Catherine
Smith, Cat
Smith, Tom
Smith, Nick
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobey, Alex
Spellar, Mr Nara
Starmer, Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeching, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Swinson, Jo
Tami, Rh Mark
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thomson, Rh Emily
Tims, Rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Twiq, Derek
Twiq, Stephen
Twiq, Liz
Urmia, Chuka
Vaz, Rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Wilson, Phil
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Crabb, Rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glynn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, Rh Mr David
Dinshane, Caroline
Dianogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donaldson, Rh Mr Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Donnegy, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, Rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, Rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, Rh Mr Tobias
Ephicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Rh Mr Nigel
Evenneth, Rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Rh Sir Michael
Field, Rh Frank
Field, Rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, Rh Dr Liam
Francois, Rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Rh Mr Marcus
Gale, Rh Sir Roger
Gammer, Mark
Gauke, Rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, Rh Nick
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Rh Mr Robert
Gove, Rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Ms Helen
Gray, James
Graying, Rh Chris
Green, Chris
Greening, Rh Justine
Grieve, Rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Haff, Rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, Rh Matt
Hands, Rh Greg
Harper, Rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, Rh Sir John
Heald, Rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, Rh Nick
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, Rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Rh Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Rh Sir John
Hurd, Rh Mr Nick
Jack, Rh Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, Rh Siraj
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Rh Mr David
Jones, Rh Mr Marcus
Kawczyński, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, Rh Mr Stephen
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, Rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, Rh Mr Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Rh Sir Edward
Letwin, Rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, Rh Brandon
Lewis, Rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Granger, Mr Ian
Lidington, Rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Rh Sir Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, Rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul

Question accordingly agreed to.

Exiting the European Union (Terms and Conditions of Employment)

That the draft Employment Rights (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 14 January, be approved.


Division No. 340]

Ayes

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Rh Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriet
Barclay, Rh Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Rh Richard
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Rh Mr Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, Rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Breton, Jack
Bridgen, Rh Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, Rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Connor
Burt, Rh Alistair
Cairns, Rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartilage, James
Cash, Rh Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, Rh Greg
Clarke, Rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Rh Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Rh Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Abigail
Courts, Robert
Cox, Rh Mr Geoffrey

Crabb, Rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glynn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, Rh Mr David
Dinshane, Caroline
Dianogly, Rh Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donaldson, Rh Mr Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Donnegy, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, Rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, Rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, Rh Mr Tobias
Ephicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Rh Mr Nigel
Evenneth, Rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Rh Sir Michael
Field, Rh Frank
Field, Rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, Rh Dr Liam
Francois, Rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Rh Mr Marcus
Gale, Rh Sir Roger
Gammer, Mark
Gauke, Rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, Rh Nick
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Rh Mr Robert
Gove, Rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Ms Helen
Gray, James
Graying, Rh Chris
Green, Chris
Greening, Rh Justine
Grieve, Rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Haff, Rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, Rh Matt
Hands, Rh Greg
Harper, Rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, Rh Sir John
Heald, Rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, Rh Nick
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, Rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Rh Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Rh Mr Nick
Jack, Rh Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, Rh Siraj
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Rh Mr David
Jones, Rh Mr Marcus
Kawczyński, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, Rh Mr Stephen
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, Rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, Rh Mr Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Rh Sir Edward
Letwin, Rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, Rh Brandon
Lewis, Rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Granger, Mr Ian
Lidington, Rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Rh Sir Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, Rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
Deferred Divisions

27 FEBRUARY 2019

Deferred Divisions

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abromas, Debbie
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniassi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana (Proxy vote cast by Chris Leslie)
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Caddy, Ruth
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alastair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Chwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Coyle, Neill
Crausby, Sir David
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cumnings, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Nic
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
De Cordova, Marsha
De Pioro, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dent, Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Ellman, Dame Louise
Emore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gil, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Goddiss, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwinnie, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harriss, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollett, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Killen, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David
Laver, Ian
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian
C.
Lynch, Holly (Proxy vote cast by Mark Tami)
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry

Question accordingly agreed to.

EXITING THE EU

The House divided: Ayes 318, Noes 288.

Division No. 341]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy

Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Breer, Jack
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brookshires, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Marla
Chalk, Alex
Chisholm, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, D r Theres
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David
T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djankov, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey
M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Dwyer-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr lain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip

Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evannett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Frank
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirtsh
Hall, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Heron, Lady
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollontome, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howard, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunter, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Deferred Divisions

27 FEBRUARY 2019

Deferred Divisions

Norman, Jesse
Newton, Sarah
Neill, Robert
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Mundell, rh David
Morrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Derry, Claire
Pawsey, Mark
Pennig, rh Sir Mike
Percy, Andrew
Philip, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prents, Victoria
Prisk, rh Sir Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Purseglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, rh Sir John
Robertson, rh Sir Thomas
Robinson, rach
Robinson, Mary
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amanda
Rutley, David
Sandsbach, Antoinette
Scull, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Sir Mike
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Clodagh
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh John
Smith, Noelle
Somers, rh Sir Nicholas
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Ian
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir German
Sys, rh Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomas, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, rh Shai
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sam
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, rh Sir John
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Nic
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Debonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, rh Sir Ranjan
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Olive
Elliot, Julie
Elman, Dame Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrell, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Fitpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, rh Sir Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John

O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawley, Mark
Pennig, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Perry, Andrew
Philp, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prents, Victoria
Prisk, rh Sir Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Purseglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, rh Sir Thomas
Robinson, rach
Robinson, Mary
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amanda
Rutley, David
Sandsbach, Antoinette
Scull, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Sir Mike
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Clodagh
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh John
Smith, Noelle
Somers, rh Sir Nicholas
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Ian
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir German
Sys, rh Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomas, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Travers, rh Patrick
Transome, Susan
Turner, Andrew
Tyrie, rh Sir John
Turton, Cheryl
Tulip, Mr John
Tugendhat, rh Chris
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, rh Shai
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sam
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, rh Sir John
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Nic
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Debonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, rh Sir Ranjan
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Olive
Elliot, Julie
Elman, Dame Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrell, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Fitpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, rh Sir Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John

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Division No. 342]

**AYES**

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bolles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braunham, Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Bums, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James

**NOES**

Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitefield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Wilson, Phil
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Question accordingly agreed to.

**EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT)**

That the draft Employment Rights (Amendment) (EU Exit) (No. 2) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 30 October 2018, be approved.

Deferred Divisions

Deferred Divisions

27 February 2019

Deferred Divisions

Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evanett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Frank
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Hannon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollebone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy

Hurd, rh Mr Nick
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jennic, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, rh Mr Marcus
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Leitwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, rh Lord Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, rh Manus
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriam, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, rh Mrs Sheryll
Murray, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert

Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Prith
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philip, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Poy, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prysk, rh Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, rh Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julia

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniacci, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, rh Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana (Proxy vote cast by Chris Leslie)
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Bloomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy

Smith, Rosston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tohurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevalyan, Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shaisle
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniacci, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, rh Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana (Proxy vote cast by Chris Leslie)
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Bloomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy

Smith, Rosston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tohurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevalyan, Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shaisle
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, rh Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Caddbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Question accordingly agreed to.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT)

That the draft Employment Rights (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) (EU Exit) (No. 2) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 31 October 2018, be approved.


**Division No. 343**

**AYES**

Adams, Nigel
Afroimi, Bim
Afrifje, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip *(Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft)*
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Soubry, rh Anna
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Swinson, Jo
Tami, rh Mark
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turely, Anna
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Wilson, Phil
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel
De Piero, Gloria
Debonnaire, Thangam
Dent, Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dow, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Elman, Dame Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Firth, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Kilien, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly (Proxy vote cast by Mark Tami)
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McPadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahaeme
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Norris, Alex
O’Hara, Brendan
O’Neill, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillipson, Bridget
Piddock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Roddia, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip (Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft)
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smethie, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Soubry, rh Anna
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Swinson, Jo
Tami, rh Mark
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thombrey, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Deferred Divisions

27 FEBRUARY 2019

Deferred Divisions

Question accordingly agreed to.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS)

That the draft Financial Services Contracts (Transitional and Saving Provision) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.

The House divided:

Ayes 318, Noes 281.

Division No. 344]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afotiam, Sim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriet
Barclay, rh Stephen
Barron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Brereton, Jack
Brighouse, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cardiff, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, rh Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto

Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkins, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kaczynski, Daniel
Keeghan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Leifroy, Jeremy
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon

Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLaughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Oxford, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philip, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, rh Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, rh Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, rh Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tothill, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizy, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whitaker, Craig
Whiteley, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Dame Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Fellows, Marion
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Foxvargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gildon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hendry, Drew
Heburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keelley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Killed, Gen
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ian
Linden, David
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly (Proxy vote cast by Mark Tami)
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGlenn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McHnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Mears, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Graham
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O’Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillipson, Bridget
Piddock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Lucy
Quershi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, rh Mr Steve
Deferred Divisions 27 FEBRUARY 2019

Deferred Divisions

Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip (Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft)
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Soubry, rh Anna
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, rh Mark
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Wilson, Phil
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Question accordingly agreed to.
The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

New Writ

Ordered,

I beg to move that Mr Speaker do issue his Warrant to the Clerk of the Crown to make out a New Writ for the electing of a Member to serve in this present Parliament for the County Constituency of Newport West, in the room of Paul Phillip Flynn, deceased.—[Mr Nicholas Brown.]
Stephen Barclay: The political declaration provides a capability that we want to maintain which is currently of suspected and convicted persons. That is the operational streamlining procedures and time limits for the surrender of persons who have committed an offence in Germany, the victims of that crime want to ensure that that perpetrator is surrendered to the United Kingdom if we leave the European Union. Is the Secretary of State aware that Scotland Yard’s deputy assistant commissioner, Richard Martin, said yesterday that leaving on a no deal would lead to a significant slowing down of police activities on such things as the European arrest warrant? What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Home Office about what extra resources might be needed by the police to maintain the same level of security in a no-deal scenario as currently applies?

Stephen Barclay: There was a reason that I chose Germany out of the EU27 countries as my example. The point I was seeking to raise is that it is in both the EU’s and our interest to enhance our mutual security by having arrangements. Of course, the EU has other arrangements, but the most streamlined way of doing that is to have the operational capability, and that is the point that the Home Secretary is making.

Workers’ Rights

3. Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Trades Union Congress on the protection of workers’ rights in the event of the UK leaving the EU without a deal.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Kwasi Kwarteng): Obviously, the Government’s priority is to secure a deal, but it is quite true and correct that Ministers and officials have carried out extensive engagement with trade unions to listen to and reassure them on workers’ rights. In fact, we have workers’ rights standards that often exceed EU standards. Whatever the scenario, the Government have pledged to maintain those workers’ rights, and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has committed to giving Parliament, whenever the EU standards on workers’ rights change, a vote to keep up with those standards.

Hugh Gaffney: The Government’s own guidance states that workers’ rights will be maintained at the existing level in the event of a no-deal Brexit, but the TUC and other organisations have expressed concern that future declaration is vague, broad and, frankly, unconvincing. When will the Secretary of State give us clarity? How can we in good conscience vote for the deal when we do not know if we will be as safe afterwards?

Stephen Barclay: On this point, the hon. Gentleman and I agree: we want to be in a position where we can surrender those suspected of crimes in Europe to those countries and they can surrender those individuals to the UK. That is in our mutual interest. The political declaration does not rule that out and it is in both sides’ interest. After all, we surrendered far more people—around 8,000—to the EU over the last eight or nine years, compared with around 1,000 that were surrendered the other way. If there is a murderer or rapist who has committed an offence in Germany, the victims of that crime want to ensure that that perpetrator is surrendered there. We also want that to happen. That is why it is in both sides’ interest to reach an agreement.

Paul Blomfield: The Secretary of State is right to talk about ending the uncertainty. Frankly, this is not good enough. Business demands certainty and the country needs clarity. This House has already passed a motion expressing our opposition to a no-deal Brexit, so the Government risk being in contempt of the House. Let me give the Secretary of State one more chance: when the motion comes forward, will they vote to reject no deal—yes or no?

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): If he will hold discussions with Cabinet colleagues on the potential merits of seeking changes to the political declaration for continued UK access to the European arrest warrant.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): The political declaration provides a basis for agreeing effective arrangements based on streamlining procedures and time limits for the surrender of suspected and convicted persons. That is the operational capability that we want to maintain which is currently in the European arrest warrant.

Alex Norris: It should be a source of great anxiety to all of us in this place that the four Children’s Commissioners of the UK have had to write to the Secretary of State expressing their worry about the lack of safety for our children and the clarity in the political declaration. It is very important that we get that clarity. The political
UK Governments could choose not to enhance workers’ rights in line with the requirements of EU employment standards. Does the Secretary of State agree that there should be a dynamic alignment between the UK and the EU on workers’ rights in the event of no deal?

Kwasi Kwarteng: As I said a moment ago, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has given a categorical undertaking that the House will have an opportunity to vote to keep up with EU standards on workers’ rights as they change. Given the hon. Gentleman’s reference to the TUC, I should mention that Len McCluskey, general secretary of Unite, has said:

“A second referendum could damage the UK’s democratic fabric.”

That is exactly the voice of the TUC. [ Interruption. ] The right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) is chuckling somewhat with embarrassment, but that is the position of the TUC.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I will be supporting the deal because I think that it is in the best interests of our country and will protect our workers, but can the Minister assure me that the Government are committed to making the United Kingdom a gold standard for workers’ rights, not just in Europe but in the world?

Kwasi Kwarteng: As I said in my earlier answer, the UK is currently a leader on workers’ rights, and there is no reason why that position should change after Brexit. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made it clear on a number of occasions that we do not want to see any diminution—any reduction—in the quality of workers’ rights and protections. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: we must vote for the deal, and we must move forward.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Can the Minister assure me that, whatever the way in which we leave the European Union, workers will receive protection that is commensurate with, or greater than, that enjoyed by others across the continent of Europe?

Kwasi Kwarteng: As I think the hon. Gentleman understands, today the UK enjoys workers’ rights protections which in most cases exceed the EU minimum, and there is no reason why they should be in any way diminished after we leave the EU.

Devolved Administrations: Talks

4. Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the devolved Administrations on the UK leaving the EU. [ 909490 ]

12. Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the devolved Administrations on the UK leaving the EU. [ 909499 ]

18. Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the devolved Administrations on the UK leaving the EU. [ 909505 ]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): On Monday I co-chaired the eighth ministerial EU negotiations forum in Cardiff. During the meeting, Jeremy Miles from the Welsh Government, Graeme Dey from the Scottish Government and I discussed the issue of data in the context of our future relationship with the EU, which I know is very important to the devolved Administrations in the discharge of their responsibilities. In addition, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State attends the Joint Ministerial Committee (EU negotiations), and, indeed, did so on his first day in office.

Angela Crawley: Does the Minister agree with the submissions made more than two years ago by the devolved Administrations, and confirmed by more recent analysis by his own Government, that staying in the single market and the customs union would be the best outcome for the whole UK economy?

Mr Walker: We have, of course, taken careful note of the submissions from the devolved Administrations, but we have Governments led by different parties with different political positions. We discuss that regularly in the ministerial forum. What we need to do is work together to ensure that our approach works for the whole UK, and that is what we will continue to do, recognising the differences of opinion that exist between the respective Governments.

Martyn Day: Will the Government now admit that if they had engaged properly with the devolved Administrations two years ago and had meaningful discussions with the Scottish Government about their—the Scottish Government’s—paper “Scotland’s Place in Europe”, they would not now be in the position of having to blackmail the House into choosing between a bad deal and no deal?

Mr Walker: We have engaged on those papers, and we have had a range of meaningful discussions over the years, in many of which I have been personally involved. However, we respect the fact that we will take politically different positions on some of these issues. The UK Government believe that they must discharge their responsibility for the UK to leave the EU, and the Scottish Government do not agree with that. Nevertheless, we will continue to work together to find the best approach to these challenges.

Marion Fellows: Given that the shadow Secretary of State for Scotland has supported a differentiated deal for Scotland in the event that Scotland is removed from the single market by the UK, and given that the Government support a differentiated deal for Northern Ireland, will the Secretary of State confirm that a similar option would be possible for Scotland?

Mr Walker: The circumstances of Northern Ireland, with the UK’s only land border with the EU, are different in that respect, but more importantly the deal we have negotiated is for the whole of the UK, and it is vital that we recognise that it was a UK-wide referendum and therefore we should deliver on that deal for the whole of the United Kingdom.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): When my hon. Friend meets Members of the Welsh Assembly does he remind them that the people of Wales voted for Brexit with far greater enthusiasm than they voted for a Welsh Assembly? Will he urge them, along with some of
the more recalcitrant members of the Cabinet, to get behind the Prime Minister and deliver Britain out of the EU with or without a deal by the end of March?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes his point with his usual force and power, and of course he is absolutely right that Wales did vote to leave the EU. I have indeed in Select Committee sessions at the Welsh Assembly reminded some Assembly Members of that, but the Welsh Government have engaged constructively with us in the ministerial forums and we will continue to work with them to deliver an outcome that works for the whole of the UK.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Last week the Government announced a new fund to help local authorities with ports to manage Brexit. It appears that the fund covers only England, and in Wales the Welsh Government provide no such dedicated ports assistance. Will the Minister please raise this with Welsh Ministers, because information provided by my local authority in Pembrokeshire, with its ferry connections to Ireland, suggests that my county is not getting the assistance it needs?

Mr Walker: My right hon. Friend as always is a champion for his county, and may I in advance wish him a happy St David’s Day? I will certainly be happy to take this up with colleagues in the Welsh Government, and I know that my ministerial colleague my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), who is in charge of no-deal preparations, will be looking at that in our overall approach to ports.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): May I remind my hon. Friend that devolved administrations need not only be the nations of the United Kingdom? They could also include the combined authorities, including the one in the west midlands.

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and I know my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) sitting beside me on the Treasury Bench has engaged in some very useful discussions with (K wasi K warteng) sitting beside me on the Treasury and I know my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne happening?

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Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and I know my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) sitting beside me on the Treasury Bench has engaged in some very useful discussions with the combined authorities, including Andy Street.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I have had correspondence from one of my companies, Clandeboye Yoghurt, and had a second meeting last Friday with another of my companies, Lakeland Dairies, both of them concerned about packaging. The issue is clear: the packaging needs to be in order before 12 March—another D-day—so the products are ready to leave on 29 March. They have been in touch with the Northern Ireland devolved Administration Department—the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs—and the Department here; can we have some idea of what is happening?

Mr Walker: I will be very happy to take that issue up on behalf of the hon. Gentleman with the relevant Departments—the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for International Trade—and make sure that they are engaging with the Northern Ireland civil service.

Dynamic Alignment with EU

5. Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): If he will hold discussions with Cabinet colleagues on the potential merits of seeking changes to the political declaration to provide for dynamic alignment with the EU on (a) workers’ rights, (b) consumer rights and (c) environmental protections.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): The UK has a tradition of exceeding EU standards, so we do not need to follow EU rules to continue to lead the way. It is a matter for Parliament to decide, and the Prime Minister has signalled her intent to give Parliament more control on these issues.

Jo Stevens: The Secretary of State needs to stop playing games on this, because he knows that even if commitments on workers’ rights and other rights are put into primary legislation, once we leave the EU they can be overturned by a future Tory Government, and for years we have heard from those on the Conservative Benches about their aspirations to deregulate the labour market and make it easier to sack people. The single market is the only way of having a binding guarantee on workers’ rights; will the Secretary of State accept that?

Stephen Barclay: I think the person playing games, with respect, is the hon. Lady, who is ignoring the fact that in a number of areas we exceed the European standards. For example, on maternity leave the UK offers 52 weeks, 39 weeks of which are paid, whereas under the pregnant workers directive just 14 weeks are paid. I do not accept the paucity of the hon. Lady’s ambition: the UK should be looking to go beyond that and provide better workers’ rights than she seems to be seeking.

Article 50: Extension

6. Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): What recent discussions he has had with EU officials on extending article 50.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): We do not want to see article 50 extended. Our focus is on getting a deal that Parliament can support and on leaving on 29 March. Extending article 50 simply defers the moment of decision and extends that uncertainty.

Wera Hobhouse: The Prime Minister has, since Tuesday, opened up the possibility of extending article 50, subject to EU agreement. From the UK’s perspective, this could be used for three options: to deliver Brexit, a general election or a people’s vote. Can the Secretary of State think of any other options?
Stephen Barclay: We are clear that we want to secure a deal and that we do not want to extend. The hon. Lady should really come clean, because she says that she wants to extend but what she really wants is to go back on the largest vote in our country’s history and revoke Brexit entirely. She does not want to extend in order to secure a deal; she wants to stay in the EU and go back on the deal. She is praying in aid an extension when that is not really her policy.

Ged Killen: If there is a vote on 14 March, will the Secretary of State vote to extend article 50?

Stephen Barclay: We have already had this question twice, but I am happy to refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave a moment ago. We are committed to securing a deal; that is the Government’s objective.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Does the Secretary of State really think that, without an extension, he can get the necessary legislation through before we leave the EU? By the way, I am not trying to obstruct us leaving.

Stephen Barclay: I respect the way in which the hon. Gentleman has framed his question, because I know, as he does, that his constituency voted leave and that many of his constituents will be keen, as mine are, to ensure that we get this deal over the line. Clearly, the withdrawal agreement Bill is a significant piece of legislation and we will need to get it through the House, but the key issue is getting the deal through, because once we have done that, we will have the basis for the necessary consensus in the House to approach that legislation.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): I entirely agree with the Secretary of State that extending article 50 is a very unsuitable way of thwarting the will of the 17.4 million people who want to leave. Does he agree that one way of avoiding having to extend article 50 would be to ensure, in the negotiations, that the Malthouse proposals—which he has asked a taskforce to work up into detail—should be put into the legal text of the treaty with a definitive implementation date?

Stephen Barclay: I pay tribute, as the Prime Minister did, to the work that my right hon. Friend and a number of colleagues have done on taking forward the alternative arrangements work. He will be aware of the time pressure relating to the derogations required as part of that, and that is why this is seen as a phase 2 issue by the European Union. He can be reassured, however, that, as the Prime Minister has set out, there is a commitment to £20 million of funding to take that work forward, together with civil service resource. That shows the goodwill and intent of the Government in relation to progressing the alternative arrangements.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Paul Flynn told me that I had star quality, but as my friend, I do not suppose that he was an objective observer. In the event of the withdrawal agreement being defeated a second time, the Government must be committed to voting in favour of a no-deal Brexit; otherwise, they will in effect have taken no deal off the table, won’t they?

Stephen Barclay: I am sure that the former Member for Newport West was not the only person to say that my right hon. Friend had star quality. The key issue is that we need to give businesses certainty and we need to secure the deal. Unlike my right hon. Friend, I am optimistic that there is an opportunity for the House to come together on the areas on which we agree. This is about the wind-down arrangements, but many of the issues on which there is further debate to be held relate to the future economic partnership. We have already signalled that we want to work much more closely across the House on taking that forward.

Mr Speaker: I am very glad that the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) was heartened by the tribute from Paul Flynn, but it seems to be manifest and incontrovertible that he exhibits star quality. Indeed, it is as manifest, incontrovertible and predictable as the passage of the seasons, for goodness’ sake.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): During yesterday’s debate, the Minister for the Cabinet Office clarified that, in the event of the House voting on 14 March for an extension to the article 50 process, the Government would be required to bring forward legislation and that the House would have a chance to approve whatever final extension length might be agreed with the EU. I have a simple question for the Secretary of State: do the Government foresee that legislation being primary or secondary, and will it be the means by which the House could express its view on the proposed length of the transition?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman is getting slightly ahead of himself. Before the vote on 14 March, we have a vote on 12 March. This Government are committed to winning that vote, and therefore the vote on 14 March will not apply.

Bioethanol Industry

8. Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): What representations has he received from the bioethanol industry as part of the negotiations for the UK leaving the EU?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Kwasi Kwarteng): Of course the Government have engaged extensively on EU exit with businesses and industries across all sectors of the economy and all regions of the UK. I am pleased to tell the House that I visited Tees valley to discuss EU exit issues with representatives of the chemical sector, including the bioethanol industry, and they made it very clear that supporting the Prime Minister’s deal is the one way they can get certainty and clarity.

Anna Turley: I thank the Minister for his response but, on behalf of the British bioethanol industry, may I highlight the devastating impact that a zero-tariff regime would have on the industry? Tariffs ensure a level playing field, and the UK industry cannot compete with US bioethanol, which has substantially lower energy costs and feedstock prices. The biofuel plant at Wilton in my constituency is only just about to restart after a production pause, but with reduced operations. British jobs are hanging in the balance.

Will the Minister meet members of the bioethanol industry again to reassure them on this point? Will he assure the House today that a zero-tariff regime for bioethanol will not come into force at any point, deal or no deal?
Kwasi Kwarteng: As the hon. Lady knows, I am happy to meet representatives of any industry, particularly from her constituency. I make it clear that the political declaration clearly states that the EU and UK will agree on a free trade area for goods. There is no question of having damaging tariffs, in the way she describes, on the industries she mentions.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I call Nick Smith. [Interruption.] I will give the fellow a chance in due course, but I think there may be some domestic difficulty if I do not call the Front Bench.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): I am grateful, Mr Speaker.

Paul Flynn never told me that I have star quality, but he did say that I might have a fighting chance if I bought his book.

Is the Minister, like me, opposed to unnecessary testing on animals? If he is, will he make sure that, as we seek to replicate regulatory regimes on the chemical industry, not a single unnecessary duplicate test is conducted on animals in this country?

Kwasi Kwarteng: This issue definitely came up in the debates on the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 last summer, and it was very much the Government’s position at the time that we would try to maintain standards on the protection of animal rights.

Jenny Chapman: What about the regulations?

Kwasi Kwarteng: And the regulations. I am determined to resist any idea of a second referendum, because that would extend the uncertainty and lack of clarity.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I know my place, Mr Speaker.

Business Community

9. Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What recent discussions has he had with representatives of the business community on the potential effect on the UK economy of leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Chris Heaton-Harris): I gently remind the hon. Gentleman that his constituency is one of the few that voted in greater numbers to leave the European Union than mine did. People took in a whole bunch of factors when they made that decision, and they expect us to deliver on it. The best way to avoid the scenario he outlines is to vote for the deal that is coming before the House.

16. [909503] Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Scottish Government analysis published last week highlights the impacts of a supply shock caused by a no-deal Brexit, which include: the destruction of supply chains; restricted supplies; significant restrictions on imports and exports; a reduction in business turnover; companies delaying investment; and the depreciation of sterling. Why does the Minister think this is worth it?

Chris Heaton-Harris: And at the same time, business investment in the UK stood at almost £47 billion in quarter 3 of 2018, which is an increase of 30% on quarter 1 of 2010. The World Bank considers the UK to be one of the best and easiest countries in the world in which to do business, with it ranking ninth out of 190. Last month, London retained its position as the top tech investment destination in Europe. I could go on and on and on.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah yes, star quality personified—Mr Barry Sheerman.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab-Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I feel really sorry for the Secretary of State and his poor little team. It is going to be Shrove Tuesday next Tuesday and my resolution will be to be a little nicer to them every day for the whole of Lent, because they are the carrying the can that has been kicked down the road by the Prime Minister and the Cabinet. The truth that has not been articulated this morning is that the mess we are in is the Government’s mess—it is the Tory party’s mess. They called the referendum, they got it wrong and now the British people and the British businesses that I represent are paying the penalty. Why does the Minister not get up, speak up for Britain and sort out our businesses, which are terrified of investing in this country?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is really enjoying himself today.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I should have what he had for breakfast more often, Mr Speaker. Unlike the hon. Gentleman, however, I am pretty aware of what my constituents voted for back in June 2016. I am pretty sure they wanted to leave the European Union. I am pretty sure they are pleased with the Norwegian sovereign wealth fund saying that it is going to invest billions of pounds in our country going forward. He should be positive about the future of the country and not such an Eeyore.

Investment and the UK Economy

11. Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What recent discussions has he had with Cabinet colleagues on the effect of the ongoing negotiations for the UK leaving the EU on investment and the UK economy. [909498]
Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Can the no-deal Minister confirm to the House that the UK is No. 2 in the whole world for foreign direct investment after only China and that although the doom mongers before the referendum said that by now we should have been in recession, with hundreds of thousands of jobs lost, this year we are going to have the fastest growth in Europe, with record numbers of people in employment?

Mr Speaker: That is a very broad question. The Minister will want to answer it.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I think he can probably guess part of the answer: the best way to do those things that he wants is to vote for the deal. May I gently remind him of something he tweeted in June last year? He wrote: “I campaigned & voted to remain. As much as I don’t like the result of the referendum, as a democrat I have to respect it.” He should do so.

Dr Whitford: The Secretary of State has regular conversations with Cabinet colleagues on all aspects of our EU exit. The UK remains a great place to do business. Only yesterday, INEOS announced £1 billion-worth of investments in the UK oil and chemical industries, something I am sure the hon. Gentleman is about to welcome wholeheartedly.

Mike Amesbury: Yesterday, I met the Cheshire and Warrington local enterprise partnership, which told me how the Government’s prolonged approach to Brexit negotiations was already having a major effect on business decisions in our locality—this is a concern spread right across the UK. Will the Government act now to protect jobs in my constituency and elsewhere? Will they remove those red lines and negotiate a customs union, close ties with the single market and proper protection for workers?

Mr Speaker: That is a very broad question. The Minister will want to answer it.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I think he can probably guess part of the answer: the best way to do those things that he wants is to vote for the deal. May I gently remind him of something he tweeted in June last year? He wrote: “I campaigned & voted to remain. As much as I don’t like the result of the referendum, as a democrat I have to respect it.” He should do so.

13. Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on reciprocal health arrangements for UK and EU citizens in the event that the UK leaves the EU (a) under the terms of the withdrawal agreement and (b) without a deal. [909500]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): The Secretary of State and I have regular discussions with Cabinet members on all EU exit-related matters. The withdrawal agreement safeguards the reciprocal healthcare entitlements of UK nationals in the EU and of EU nationals living in the UK. Although we remain committed to leaving the EU with a deal, as a responsible Government we are preparing for all outcomes, including in respect of reciprocal healthcare. The Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care have written to EU partners to seek to protect healthcare arrangements.

14. David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): What recent steps he has taken to prevent the UK from leaving the EU without a deal. [909501]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Chris Heaton-Harris): As the Prime Minister said on Tuesday, the only ways to rule out no deal are to revoke article 50, which we will not do, or for Parliament to vote for a deal. We are working to achieve legally binding changes on the backstop, and we have set out commitments to protect workers’ rights and the environment and to an enhanced role for Parliament in the next phase of negotiations. We are determined to address the wider concerns of those who voted to leave. We all know that the House needs to support a withdrawal agreement, and we are working hard to deliver that.

David Linden: It is not quite as simple as that. Surely the best way to take no deal off the table is for the Government just to say that they are taking no deal off the table, so why, when the SNP put an amendment to Parliament last night, did the Government whip their MPs, including Scottish Tory MPs, to walk through the No Lobby and not take no deal off the table?

Dr Whitford: The Department’s own report shows that almost a third of the Government’s essential no-deal projects will not be ready for 29 March. The Minister will not say how the Government will vote on 12 March, but if the House votes against no deal, will that be respected?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am fairly hopeful that the vote on 12 March will be carried by the House because it is the one for the deal.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Does the Minister agree that, although it is the Government’s policy to leave the European Union with a deal, the SNP’s position is to
accept no deal whatsoever, and they are therefore trying to manoeuvre the debate to the point of no deal, which would suit their argument—chaos, leading to an independence referendum, leading to the break-up of the United Kingdom?

Chris Heaton-Harris: My hon. Friend makes a strong point, with which I mostly agree, although the Government have been preparing for two and a half years for our leaving without a negotiated deal so it would certainly not be chaotic.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I remind the Minister that the fact that a majority of Conservative MPs votes for something does not make it right. Certainly, the experience with the Scottish Tories is that they vote not for what they want to happen but for what they want their Whips to see them voting for.

Will the Minister comment on the statement made by his colleague the Secretary of State for Scotland last night? He said that the Government voted to leave no deal on the table to make sure that it did not happen, and the SNP voted to take no deal off the table to make sure that it did happen. Does the rest of the Cabinet share the Secretary of State for Scotland’s particular and idiosyncratic form of logic?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Personally, I think we are lucky to have such a brilliant Secretary of State for Scotland. I completely understand that the hon. Gentleman has taken a very principled position on not wanting to leave the European Union; I just wish that there were others, perhaps on the Opposition Front Bench, who would be honest with the British people—especially those in northern Labour leave seats around Barnsley and south Yorkshire, the east and west midlands, Manchester and so on—and say, “Actually, the new Labour position is to stay in the European Union” and that they disrespect the votes in the referendum.

Peter Grant: Yet again we see that, when it suits the Government, they insist on looking at the voting pattern of individual constituencies in the north of England but ignore the voting patterns of entire nations that are supposedly partners in this Union. If the reason why we want to take no deal of the table is that, secretly, we want it to happen, does that give us an explanation of why the Government keep telling the Scottish Government to take independence referendums off the table? Are they secretly wanting that to happen as well?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I might have misheard the hon. Gentleman, but may I gently remind him that the Scottish people voted to stay within the United Kingdom?

Regeneration of Towns

15. Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the effect of the UK leaving the EU on funding for the regeneration of towns.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Kwasi Kwarteng): Of course, my hon. Friend will be well aware that leaving the EU creates fresh opportunities to allocate growth funding according to our own UK priorities, including the regeneration of towns. The Government are committed to creating the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to tackle these inequalities across our communities. Leaving the EU with a deal will mean, of course, that we remain in the existing programmes until they close. We have also protected this funding in the case of a no-deal scenario.

Chris Green: Will my hon. Friend confirm how we will make the Shared Prosperity Fund better than the EU programmes that it will replace?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend, and I think everyone across this House who has an elementary grasp of arithmetic, will know that for every £20 that we put into the EU pot we got £10 back, so we were a net contributor. We were the second biggest net contributor, and the logic of that is that we can more than compensate for the loss of EU funding across our communities. The UK Shared Prosperity Fund will go some way to meeting those concerns.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Anyone with an elementary grasp of arithmetic can also read the latest studies showing that, had the United Kingdom being staying in the European Union, we would have received far more in regional development funding because of the increase in regional disparities under this Government’s austerity for the past 10 years. Will the Minister tell me that the Shared Prosperity Fund, of which we have no details with only 30 days to go to Brexit, will match the increased funding that we would have had from the European Union?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The point I was trying to make was that we as a country were a net contributor. We were the second biggest net contributor in the system that redistributed those funds. There is no doubt that the UK Shared Prosperity Fund can more than match EU funds. The details of that, as the hon. Lady well knows, will be discussed as we leave the EU on 29 March.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): May I quietly and politely encourage the Minister to speak to his colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to make sure that funding from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, which will come in once we have left the European Union, is not required to be on a match funding basis? Our small towns up and down the country are unable to raise the match funding to access such funds, so the money ends up in the big cities, where the capital is available.

Kwasi Kwarteng: That is obviously an important part of the ongoing discussion. There is no doubt that, with the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, we will be able to have a better, more sensitive regional allocation than is currently the case under the EU system.

UK Citizens: Rights in EU

19. Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What steps his Department has taken to ensure that the rights of UK citizens living in the EU are protected in the event that the UK leaves the EU without a deal.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): The UK Government have been unequivocal that, under any scenario including no deal, EU citizens and their family members living here at exit will be able to stay. We are calling on member states to reciprocate that unilateral offer for UK citizens. Alongside that, the Government supported an amendment moved by my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) yesterday to seek to ring-fence the citizens’ rights part of the withdrawal agreement. We will write to the European Council to seek its views on this as soon as possible.

Bob Blackman: I thank the Minister for his answer. Following the Government’s acceptance last night of the amendment of my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire, which I was pleased to support, what action will they now take to introduce the necessary legislation to safeguard EU citizens’ rights in this country and also to protect UK citizens in the EU?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. We have already introduced some of the legislation for the settled status scheme to ensure that it is available for EU citizens in the UK. Of course, safeguarding the overall package for UK citizens in the EU will require a reciprocal agreement. It is for that reason that we will be writing to the European Council to raise the issue and seek to take forward talks on this as soon as possible.

Devolved Administrations and Local Government

20. Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential effect on the devolved Administrations and local government of the UK leaving the EU.

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. He consistently speaks up for businesses such as British Steel in my constituency from multimillion-pound bills that they can ill afford. Will my hon. Friend take action to prevent suffering heavy financial penalties through no fault of their own?

Luke Graham: Engagement with the devolved Administrations is very important on devolved issues, but what steps is my hon. Friend taking to involve MPs from the devolved nations in reserved issues, because every MP in this House is equal to every other?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Of course, MPs in this House will have an important role to play on UK-wide frameworks, which we are working to develop as soon as possible. Once we leave the EU, directly elected parliamentarians in this House and the devolved Administrations will be responsible for more than they were during the period of our membership.

Nic Dakin: The threat of a no-deal exit from the EU means that the ability of businesses to use 2019 emissions trading scheme credits to address 2018 ETS costs is at risk, meaning that businesses may be subject to multimillion-pound bills that they can ill afford. Will the Secretary of State urgently take action to prevent businesses such as British Steel in my constituency from suffering heavy financial penalties through no fault of their own?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman makes an important and fair point. He consistently speaks up for the steel industry, and the 2018 emissions surrender under the European emissions trading scheme is an issue of concern to that industry. I have spoken to my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary and he is happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss the matter. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is undertaking an analysis of the issue, and I am happy to engage with the hon. Gentleman regarding that.

T1. Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Since the last departmental questions, this House has given a clear indication of what it needs to support a deal with the EU. The Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the Attorney General and I have held discussions with key EU figures, and the Prime Minister made it clear in her statement on Tuesday that we are making good progress and remain committed to leaving with a deal on 29 March.

Nic Dakin: Thirty days ago the Government backed the Brady amendment and the Prime Minister said she would try to obtain legally binding changes to the withdrawal agreement that deal with concerns on the backstop.—[Official Report, 29 January 2019; Vol. 653, c. 788.]

It is clear from yesterday’s debate that some Members on the Government Benches have a high expectation that legally binding changes may yet be agreed, even at the eleventh hour. Against that background, will the Secretary of State confirm that, although discussions have taken place about work streams and possible additional words to further explain the backstop, in the 30 days since the Brady amendment, the Government have not drafted or put forward to the EU any proposed words
that could conceivably be described as “legally binding changes to the withdrawal agreement” in relation to the backstop?

Stephen Barclay: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is right to refer to the package of measures that we are putting before the European Union, and the Prime Minister touched on that in her remarks on Tuesday. In terms of the specific wording, these are obviously live discussions and need to be given the space to be conducted. As the Prime Minister set out in her statement on Tuesday, we have been very clear with the European Union that the effects of these changes have to be legally binding. That is what the Brady amendment required and it is the clear will of the House; that is the crux of the issue that we are discussing with the European Union.

Keir Starmer: Well, this may be Brexit questions, but it is clearly not Brexit answers. The Secretary of State can make questions all he likes, but his evasion tells its own story. He knows and I know that the Government are not even attempting to change a single word about the backstop in the withdrawal agreement, and he knows the expectation among his hon. Friends that there are going to be those changes to the withdrawal agreement. Can he not simply admit that the only plan the Government have is to run down the clock and attempt to force MPs to choose between the same basic deal that was rejected in the first meaningful vote and no deal?

Stephen Barclay: With respect to the right hon. and learned Gentleman, there is an inherent contradiction in his question. He says that the Government are trying to run down the clock while, at the same time, we gave a clear commitment yesterday to give the House a vote, if the meaningful vote does not go through on the 12th, on whether the House would then support leaving without a deal. That is not in the Government’s interest. It is also not in our interest to run down the clock because, as he is well aware, we need to ratify the agreement through the withdrawal agreement Bill prior to leaving, and therefore we need time for that ratification to take place, so there is a contradiction within his question.

It is not in our interest to run down the clock, and, further, it is not in the interests of the business community, because they want the uncertainty ended as soon as possible. I gently say to the right hon. and learned Gentleman, while congratulating him on perhaps winning a battle on his Front Bench on a second referendum when so many of his fellow shadow Ministers have spoken out publicly against it, that a second referendum will prolong the uncertainty, and I do not think that is in the interests of business.

T8. [909519] David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Does the Minister agree that if a no-deal Brexit was really akin to the arrival of the four horsemen of the apocalypse, Members in all parts of the House would be rallying behind the Prime Minister to support the deal that will get us out by the end of March?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Kwasi Kwarteng): My hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), in preparing this country for no deal, I do not believe that a no-deal scenario will lead to the sort of destruction that the doomsayers on the Opposition Benches have suggested. We are doing lots and lots to secure our safety and our prosperity in the case of no deal.

T2. [909513] Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): In Cambridge, it is local elections season. When I knocked on my first door on Sunday, I interrupted someone who modestly described himself as a mid-career academic. He was filling in a job application to move to Switzerland and told me that a number of colleagues in his department were doing the same, the reason being that his department faces losing 20% of its funding from the European Research Council. These are senior scientists who have heard what the Government have to say but have concluded that their future lies elsewhere. How can the Secretary of State reassure the 48% who feel that their future has been put at risk?

Stephen Barclay: I am very happy to tell my fellow Cambridgeshire MP how I reassure the academics of Cambridge on this issue. If we look at just how many European Union universities are in the top 50 compared with the number of British universities in the top 50, we see that the determination of their success is not based on their membership of the European Union.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): The Scottish Government are demanding additional funding for preparations to leave the EU. Can the Minister confirm that in 2018-19, despite receiving £37 million, the Scottish Government allocated only £27 million for that purpose—a gap of £10 million?

Chris Heaton-Harris: My hon. Friend has some good figures, and I have some extra, updated figures for him. The devolved Administrations received a total of £120 million in the 2019-20 EU exit funding allocations. The Scottish Government received £54.7 million for that period. We have been working behind the scenes with the Scottish Government, who have been nothing but professional, courteous and actually quite excellent to deal with on no-deal preparation.

T3. [909514] Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State recognise that if the Prime Minister returns with an amended version of her deal, there is a very strong case that parliamentary approval being subject to subsequent ratification in a public vote?

Stephen Barclay: We have had a public vote. The people voted in record numbers, and they gave us a clear instruction to deliver on that. I simply remind the right hon. Gentleman that he, like so many Labour Members, stood on a manifesto that committed to give force to that vote. Many voters in his constituency and others across the country will be baffled as to why, given that manifesto, his party now seems to be going back on it and supporting a second referendum. That is not what it was saying at the general election.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Magna Carta states: “All merchants may leave or enter England”—
of course, now the United Kingdom—

“in safety and security. They may stay and travel throughout England by road or by water, free from all illegal tolls, in order to buy and sell according to the ancient and rightful customs.”

Does that remain the policy of Her Majesty’s Government?

Kwasi Kwarteng: It has been a while since I heard Magna Carta quoted in the Chamber. I reassure my hon. Friend that we are committed to the principles of free trade to which that excerpt from Magna Carta alludes. We want a free trade agreement. We have been a champion of free trade over many centuries, and I strongly urge him to back the deal so that we can craft an agreement that will ensure free trade.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): No, I do not agree with that statement. I made it clear in my previous answer that we are negotiating on behalf of the whole United Kingdom. That is why we have forums for engaging with the devolved Administrations. Sadly, Ministers from the Northern Ireland Administration are not available to engage with us, but they will be treated in the same way as Ministers from the other devolved Administrations.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the UK prosperity fund gives the UK Government and Scottish Government the opportunity to work together to improve all aspects of Scots’ lives?

Mr Walker: Wholeheartedly, yes.

Mr Robin Walker: The Government are stepping up investment in research and development and building up the amount by which the UK leads other countries. As per the Secretary of State’s answer, I expect the strong position of our universities to continue to strengthen in years to come.

T10. [909521] Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State guarantee that in the event of a no-deal Brexit, the UK will have stocks of the essential dietary products for people with the rare disease phenylketonuria, or PKU?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Probably better than my confirming that is for me to point the hon. Lady to the written ministerial statement laid before the House earlier this week, which goes into great detail. I will happily give her a copy afterwards.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): The recent Government report states that only 40,000 of the 240,000 British businesses that trade exclusively with the EU have applied for their export registration number. Businesses say that it could actually be given automatically if they are registered for VAT. Is this just incompetence, or are the Government looking for a scapegoat in the event of a disastrous for business no-deal exit?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am surprised that the hon. Lady is not. I believe she has sat on a number of the statutory instrument Committees. We have nearly completed our statutory instrument programme to get ready for a no-deal situation, and we have plenty of mitigating measures in place should other primary legislation be held back inadvertently by Members not wanting as smooth a departure as possible if we are to leave without a deal.

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have, talked about 14 March. The key issue is the vote on the 12th—the meaningful vote—and getting a deal. That is what EU leaders have said they want, and that is what this Government want.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I voted for Labour’s Brexit deal, but does the Secretary of State agree with the CBI that a no-deal Brexit will mean “a lost decade, stifling the UK’s potential and leaving us less competitive, productive and prosperous for years to come”?

Stephen Barclay: When the hon. Gentleman says he voted for Labour’s Brexit deal, I am slightly confused about which one, because its position has obviously changed somewhat. Given that his own constituents voted in a majority to leave the EU, I would say that I share their optimism for the future. We are a country that can go out into the world and succeed, and we can make Brexit an opportunity for us, rather than as portrayed in the way he sets out.
Business of the House

10.37 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom):
The business for next week will be:


Tuesday 5 March—Proceedings on a business of the House motion, followed by proceedings on the Northern Ireland Budget (Anticipation and Adjustments) (No. 2) Bill.

Wednesday 6 March—Motion relating to the appointment of the Comptroller and Auditor General, followed by proceedings on a business of the House motion, followed by proceedings on the Northern Ireland Regional Rates and Energy (No. 2) Bill.

Thursday 7 March—General debate on International Women’s Day, followed by a general debate on the opportunities and challenges facing the modern Commonwealth in its 70th year. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 8 March—The House will not be sitting.

I would like to wish the House a very happy St David’s Day for tomorrow. I thought about wearing a leek, but then I thought a daffodil would be more subtle. Some of my real highlights as Leader of the House in the past 12 months have included my visit to the Royal Welsh show, meeting Women2Win Wales and stopping off for a quick half at the Tiny Rebel brewery in Newport.

As the Prime Minister said yesterday, the House will want to pay tribute to Eve Griffith-Okaik, who retires this week after many years of dedicated service to four Speakers. I was delighted that you, Mr Speaker, the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), the next Clerk of the House, John Benger, and others raised a glass with me this week to wish our fantastic Clerk, Sir David Natzler— he is in his place—all the very best for his retirement. This is his last day at the Table, and we will miss him. I hear that his retirement balloon has pride of place in his office. We wish both David and Eve, and their respective families, all the best for a healthy and happy retirement.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week, but I am surprised that she did so for only one week. The Prime Minister practically told us what will happen in the following week, and I cannot see why the Government did not put that business through. The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union actually announced the business and said when the vote will take place.

Last week, I asked the Leader of the House to confirm that all fire and safety works that were due to take place in the February recess had been carried out. Is she satisfied that that will be done in time? Again, I ask about Opposition days and the Easter and May recesses. I know what she will say—in a robotic way she will say that a business of the House motion will be tabled—but I ask her to help the House and its staff a bit more, so that they can plan.

Let me help the Leader of the House with a figure for the costs of the Government cancelling recess. In response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) put the figure at between £300,000 and £400,000. It was the Government who decided to cancel recess and waste those costs.

Is the Leader of the House still confident that there is enough time to put in place all the necessary secondary legislation by the time we leave the EU? During the Government-cancelled recess last week, just eight Brexit statutory instruments were laid before Parliament—the lowest total number out of the past six weeks. Only 59% of affirmative Brexit SIs have now been debated, which leaves more than 100 in this place and the other place. When will they be debated, because we need that scrutiny?

The Labour party has prayed against the Human Medicines (Amendment) Regulations 2019, which is statutory instrument No. 62. Under the serious shortage protocol for medicine, that appalling piece of secondary legislation enables pharmacists to override GPs when deciding what medication to give people. Some people need specific, rather than generic, medication, and pharmacists would be able to lower the dosage. That is absolutely appalling, to such an extent that the Good Law Project has started judicial review proceedings against the Government. When will we have that debate, and when can that SI be annulled? Labour Members also prayed against the Amendments Relating to the Provision of Integrated Care Regulations 2019, which is statutory instrument No. 248. May we have a debate on that?

In her statement on Monday, the Prime Minister made no mention of the proposed European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill. If the Government manage to get the withdrawal agreement through, they must bring forward that Bill. What is the timeframe for that, and in the meantime could the draft Bill be published? The Government—not anybody else—have postponed the meaningful vote, and that has led to the possibility of a no-deal scenario. It is the Government who have been appalling and disloyal to this country and the British people, not those who have had to point out what will happen if there is no deal.

I do not know whether the Leader of the House has read the Government’s “Implications for business and trade of a no deal exit on 29 March 2019”, which was published on 26 February. A no-deal Brexit could mean that the UK economy would be 9% smaller in the long term, and the flow of goods through Dover would be “significantly reduced for months”. The Government are behind on contingency planning for a third of their critical projects. Banks will gain access to £300 billion to help them to deal with the financial shock, but what about the rest of us? What about the people of this country who will also face that financial shock? The UK trade and drinks industry has warned that one in eight companies could go out of business if the UK leaves without a deal, and around 70% of the UK’s food imports come from the EU.

On Tuesday, the Government held emergency talks after discovering that we have the wrong kind of pallets for a no-deal scenario. Will the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs come to the House and explain what happened at those emergency
meetings? May we have a debate or statement on what will happen regarding our food security? That situation is what is appalling and disloyal to this country.  

There is some good news. The former chair and current president of the Chagos Islands (British Indian Ocean Territory) all-party group, the Leader of the Opposition, has been an advocate for the rights of the Chagossians for some time. The International Court of Justice said that Britain’s acquisition of the Chagos archipelago in the 1960s was “wrongful”, and that Britain must “bring to an end its administration of the Chagos Archipelago as rapidly as possible.”

About 2,000 people were evicted, and they want to go home. That was in our manifesto—that is another point fulfilled—and we want the Chagos islanders to return to their homelands. Given that the Government seem to want to cling on to their colonial powers, may we have a statement from the Foreign Secretary? Will the Government abide by the Court’s decision, or are they going to appeal?

Finally, it does not really matter how big your daffodil is; it’s the wishes that count, and I want to wish everybody a happy St David’s Day. I, too, thank David Lionel Natzler and Eve for all their work. It is David’s last day today. It is lovely to see him at the Table; I was sorry he could not be there when we all wished him well. I shall miss seeing him in his Lycra as he gets on his bike. I want to wish everybody—those who are obvious, those who are behind the scenes, the admin assistants and unsung heroes who keep this House going—who are also retiring. We wish them well. Thank you for your years of service to the House, good bye and good luck.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her good and thoughtful remarks about Sir David Natzler. The hon. Lady asks why I am not announcing more than one week of business. To be clear, the Prime Minister said that the meaningful vote would come back by 12 March at the latest. I have announced the business for next week, but, as always, if we can come back to the House before then, we will. The hon. Lady asks about fire and safety measures in the House. I apologise; I did not catch that last week. I will write to her with an update, although she will appreciate that it is a House of Commons Commission matter, and as a member of the Commission, she could equally ask the Director General for that information.

The hon. Lady asks about Opposition days. She will appreciate that I am seeking to balance the many different requests from across the House for business, including from the Opposition, the Backbench Business Committee and Members across the House. As I said last week, I was pleased to be able to find time for a debate on the draft REACH—registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals—regulations on Monday, following her request in business questions on 24 January. She also mentions two further statutory instruments that she would like debated in the Chamber. I have seen the official Opposition’s prayer against the NHS and human medicines SIs. I encourage her to raise those through the usual channels, as is the convention.

The hon. Lady asks about recesses, particularly the cost of the February cancellation. She will appreciate that there were several very important debates that week, including on the NHS 10-year plan, which she herself asked for, and the opportunity for many Members to question Ministers on important and urgent matters that arose that week, while several Brexit SIs also passed through their Delegated Legislation Committees that week. The Public Gallery was also full of young people on their half-term school holidays who were able to participate and see their democracy in action. It was a very important week.

The hon. Lady asks about the timeframe for the withdrawal agreement Bill. As I have said several times, we will bring it forward as soon as the House votes to support the Prime Minister’s withdrawal agreement and future political declaration. She asks about no-deal preparation. As she will appreciate, there has been an enormous operation by a superb civil service, to which we owe a huge debt of gratitude for its enormous contribution to this complex project. The United Kingdom is extremely well prepared. A number of the challenges are around our inability to force third parties to do their bit, but the UK has made significant steps towards being prepared for all eventualities. She will appreciate that we have just had Brexit questions. I am sure she will have listened carefully to the answers.

Finally, on the Chagos islands, the hon. Lady will be aware that what the UN gave this week was an advisory opinion, not a judgment. Of course, the UK Government will look at the detail carefully, but the defence facilities on the British Indian Ocean Territory help to protect people here in Britain and around the world from terrorist threats, organised crime and piracy.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I join others in wishing our Clerk a long, happy and healthy retirement. He has been a magnificent servant to this House.

Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on mechanisms to help people manage personal debt? I recently attended the 10th anniversary of a local charity that does just that, and it told us that the Office for Budget Responsibility has said that by 2022 total household debt will be £2.26 trillion. The message should go from this House that credit card companies and banks should stop ripping people off and making the situation worse with their outrageous interest charges.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I was City Minister in 2014, when the Government fundamentally reformed the regulation of the consumer credit market, giving the Financial Conduct Authority robust regulatory powers to protect consumers better. He is right that no lender should be ripping off consumers with appalling high interest rates. As he will be aware, we are increasing funding for publicly funded debt advice to more than £56 million in this financial year—enough to provide financial advice to help more than 530,000 people. The Government are committed to delivering a well-functioning and sustainable consumer credit market that meets the needs of all consumers.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week, and I wish everybody a happy St David’s Day tomorrow. I am pleased that the Leader of the House chose to wear a daffodil—there have been more than enough “leeks” from her side of the House.

My party and I wish the very best of retirements to our Clerk, Sir David Natzler, although we might not miss the Lycra quite as much as the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz).
Following meaningless vote No. 3, we are still no further forwards, and there are now only 29 days left until we are supposed to leave the EU. What a waste of another week! Nothing whatever has been achieved in the past few days. The Government’s disastrous no deal remains on the table. There may or may not be a delay to achieve God knows what. In the meantime, there is no sign whatever that the EU will do anything to satisfy the Government’s damaging demands that the backstop be reviewed.

Britain’s biggest post-war political crisis is currently on hold, and at some point the inevitable conclusion will have to be played out. When is that going to be? When will we have the meaningful vote? This Brexit crisis will define the Conservative party for the rest of its wretched future. It is theirs to own—it is a Tory Brexit—and it is something that this nation will have to deal with.

May we have a debate on double-speak? Last night, we had the ridiculous sight of the Secretary of State for Scotland saying that the Scottish National party supported and coveted a no-deal Brexit. That is what he was saying. That was right after the House had voted on an SNP amendment that no deal, forever and a day, be taken right off the table. And the Scottish Tories all voted for this no deal to remain on the table—perhaps in an attempt to have it taken off. That must now rank with “War is peace,” and “This Government are strong and stable,” as an example of Tory double-speak.

Lastly, may we have a debate on a car park tax? [ Interruption. ] You’ll enjoy this one. Yesterday, the Prime Minister raged against the SNP for introducing such a tax in Scotland—which we have not, but which already exists in England. The English car park tax is, of course, discretionary and remains a matter for local authorities. So far, only one English local authority has taken advantage of the power. I am sure that the Leader of the House will want to join me in my huge guffaws of laughter at the absurd sight of Tories in my constituency in Perthshire protesting against their own Perthshire Tory council so that it does not introduce a tax that does not even exist yet and it has already ruled out. Now, Mr Speaker—you there you have Tory double-think and Tory double-speak.

Andrea Leadsom: On the hon. Gentleman’s last point, he is really clutching at straws as an SNP Member who has allowed his own Government in Scotland to raise taxes for workers in Scotland. He is guffawing about the question of a car park tax—far more important that he look at the log in his eye over the mainstream taxes on Scottish workers, who now pay more than those in the rest of the United Kingdom.

The hon. Gentleman asks about the next steps for the meaningful vote. He will be aware that the Prime Minister has given three commitments—[ Interruption. ]

Mr Speaker: Order. I can see that the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) is in a jovial and jocular mood, but he asked a series of questions. The Leader of the House is answering them, but he seems more interested in having a sort of finger-wagging competition with Conservative Members on the Government Benches. He should do the Leader the courtesy of listening to her replies.

Andrea Leadsom: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The hon. Gentleman asks about the next steps for the meaningful vote. The Prime Minister has set out three steps. First, we will hold a second meaningful vote by Tuesday 12 March at the latest. Second, if the Government have not won a meaningful vote by Tuesday 12 March, then, in addition to our obligations to table a neutral amendable motion under section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, we will table a motion to be voted on by Wednesday 13 March at the latest, asking this House if it supports leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement and a framework for a future relationship on 29 March. The UK will leave without a deal on 29 March if that vote is passed. Thirdly, if the House, having rejected leaving with the deal negotiated with the EU, then also rejects leaving on 29 March without a withdrawal agreement and future framework, the Government will, on 14 March, bring forward a motion on whether Parliament wants to seek a short, limited extension to article 50. If the House votes for an extension, the Government will seek to agree that extension approved by the House with the EU and to bring forward the necessary legislation to change the exit date. That is what the Prime Minister said and I hope that that is very clear to the hon. Gentleman.

What I would also say to the hon. Gentleman is that we on the Government Benches are trying our hardest to deliver on the result of the June 2016 referendum. He and his colleagues in the SNP are trying their hardest to undermine the result of their referendum in 2014.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Edmund Burke defined statesmanship as a combination of “a disposition to preserve, and an ability to improve”.

In such a spirit, I met representatives of the taxi industry, trade unions and local authorities yesterday to discuss the excellent report “Taxi and Private Hire Vehicle Licensing”. This was commissioned during an enlightened period at the Department for Transport and was responded to by the Government a couple of weeks ago in a written statement. Will the Leader of the House arrange for the Government to come to this House, with an oral statement or possibly even a debate, to make clear when they intend to bring forward the necessary legislation to give the 30-odd recommendations in that report real life? It is clear that the taxi and private hire vehicle licensing system at the moment is not fit for purpose. Public safety is critical to all our interests and the nation’s. It must never be curtailed, capped or compromised.

Andrea Leadsom: First of all, I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for his work, as a former Transport Minister, in actually reviewing this issue himself. He will be aware that the Government are looking very carefully at how to improve the licensing of taxis to ensure that we keep the public safe.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): May I add my warmest regards to Sir David on his retirement? Sir David, may you have pleasure by the platter and troubles by the teaspoon in your long and happy retirement.

May I also send my best wishes to all Welsh Members and their constituents for St David’s Day tomorrow? I do know, however, that the Welsh carry a grudge against
people from the north-east, particularly the men, because we have always grown much bigger leeks than the Welsh—much, much bigger leeks. [Laughter.]

I am grateful for the business statement and the fact that next Thursday we will have important debates on International Women’s Day and on the Commonwealth. We had a veritable cornucopia of applications in the Backbench Business Committee on Tuesday. With that in mind, we have managed to secure time for: a debate in Westminster Hall on Thursday 7 March on short prison sentences, which had been an estimates day application; a general debate, on 12 March, on fire safety and sprinkler systems; a general debate, on 19 March, on the effect of leaving the EU on the UK’s health and social sector; and on 26 March a general debate on forced live organ extraction in China. We have an awful lot still waiting, so the more time we can secure, the happier Back Benchers around the House will be.

Andrea Leadsom: Obviously, I am always very happy to hear from the hon. Gentleman about the many and varied subjects that Back-Bench Members want to discuss, and I will always try to accommodate them wherever I can.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Tomorrow, I will be going out with an ambulance crew in my constituency. Across the House, we will know of the challenges that the ambulance service faces, particularly including some horrendous violent attacks on ambulance crews. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the ambulance service and those challenges?

Andrea Leadsom: I am glad that my hon. Friend raises this issue and gives me the opportunity to thank all our ambulance crews for the amazing work that they do. He will appreciate that the ambulance service is something that all of us, right across the country, absolutely depend on. I encourage him perhaps to seek a Westminster Hall debate so that right hon. and hon. Members can share their experiences of the amazing work done by ambulance paramedics right across the country.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Cuts to police budgets have left my constituents in Hoyland well over eight miles from their nearest police station. May we have an urgent debate in Government time on how police funding should be based not on how much council tax can be paid, but on the actual demand in our community?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will be aware that since 2010, we have been tackling crime, reforming the police and toughening sentences for serious offences. We have protected police funding overall since 2015, and in the last police grant settlement we announced up to £970 million of extra investment in the policing system next year. That is more than Labour promised at the last election, and it is for police and crime commissioners to allocate that money to meet the policing priorities in their area.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I add my congratulations to Sir David and Eve on their retirements.

This House has rightly concentrated a substantial amount of time on debating measures to combat antisemitism, but we should abhor all racism, racial hatred and religious hatred. It is now time for a proper debate on a definition of Islamophobia. The all-party group on Islamophobia has come up with a working proposal, on which it is consulting, but that has drawn criticism from a large number of faith communities. It is time for the Government to come forward with a proposal so that we have a clear definition that everyone can support. May we have a debate on this in Government time so that we can reach some solid conclusions on which the whole House can agree?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right to raise our disgust at any form of racial or religious hatred or disadvantage. The APPG that he mentions has a very interesting proposition and I am sure that he will find a way to bring that to the attention of Ministers so that we can see what progress can be made.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), was somewhat snippy with me earlier when I asked him about the possibility that we will not have a functioning statute book at 11.1 pm on Friday 29 March, so I ask the Leader of the House for any information that she can give us about the whereabouts of the Agriculture Bill, the Fisheries Bill, the Healthcare (International Arrangements) Bill or any of the other statutory instruments that we have to get through. Does she share my lack of confidence about our having enough time to get through all of those by the deadline?

Andrea Leadsom: I can certainly reassure the hon. Lady in an entirely non-snippy way that I know exactly where all those Bills are. The Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill, the Agriculture Bill and the Fisheries Bill are all currently before the House of Commons. The Healthcare (International Arrangements) Bill, the Trade Bill and the Financial Services (Implementation of Legislation) Bill are also progressing. We have nine exit-related Bills, in addition to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, which are either already going through Parliament or have already received Royal Assent. I can assure her that we are comfortable that all primary legislation that needs Royal Assent by Brexit date will be achieved. If it does not have that, it will have Royal Assent by the date on which it is needed.

With regards to secondary legislation, the hon. Lady will be aware that over 460 EU exit SIs have been laid to date—more than 75% of the SIs that we anticipate will be required by exit day. More than 240 have already been made and are thus ready to come into force. Good progress is being made and I remain confident that we will be able to get all the urgent SIs that we need through in time for 29 March.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): May we have a debate on the respective roles and responsibilities of Back Benchers and Ministers? There appears to be some confusion among colleagues who happily accept the Queen’s shilling. They might well enjoy life more on the Back Benches, and would be able to participate in such a debate.
Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate my hon. Friend, who always enjoys full participation in debates. I completely understand the point that he has made, but he will appreciate that it is vital for all members of the Government to retain collective responsibility, and to seek to support the Prime Minister as she finalises these very tense negotiations. I encourage all right hon. and hon. Members to think very carefully, because at the end of the day we owe it to the country to deliver on the referendum and vote for the Prime Minister's deal.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): More than 50% of the prison population were excluded from school. Last year the Government announced a review of school exclusions, led externally by Edward Timpson. They said that they would publish its report by the end of 2018, and now they are saying they will do so by early 2019. How early in 2019 can we expect to see the report?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady did not mention that she would raise this matter, so I cannot answer her question because I am not aware of the timing. [Interruption.] The hon. Lady is shouting at me. “When is the report coming?” She will appreciate that had she asked me in advance, I could have provided the answer. If she will write to me, I will seek a response for her.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): Colchester Borough Council wants to waste £100,000 of our new homes bonus infrastructure money on a giant elephant sculpture on a roundabout. I am a big fan of elephants, but this is ridiculous. May we have a debate on the appropriate use of new homes bonus money, and the role that it plays in providing infrastructure to support housing growth?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has raised an important issue. The question is, is the elephant on a trunk road? [Laughter.] I have every sympathy with my hon. Friend. None of us wants to see white elephants, particularly when they are paid for with public money.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Gordon Banks's funeral will take place on Monday, and lots of people will be lining the streets. My constituents find it wonderful that they are doing to celebrate the launch of Fairtrade Fortnight in Montrose. Many events will be taking place throughout the country to mark the fortnight, and I hope that the hon. Lady was able to attend yesterday's event in the Churchill Room, hosted by our hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince). I congratulate all those in Montrose who are making the most of this opportunity to provide fair trade for people all over the world.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Leader of the House will know of the publication of various reports showing that the UK Government’s austerity drive is adversely affecting women more than anyone else. According to Unison Wales's recent Audit of Austerity, 18,400 of the local authority jobs that have been lost in Wales as a result of that austerity drive were women’s jobs. Will the Leader of the House find Government time for a debate on the Government’s austerity agenda and the terrible impact it is having on women in the workforce?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is giving his perspective on the current plight of women, but across the country the female unemployment rate is at a record low and there are higher percentages than ever before of women on FTSE 100 and FTSE 350 boards, getting women into the most senior roles in our economy. There is a huge amount more to do to ensure we close the gender pay gap and ensure more women can have the flexible working they sometimes need in order to accommodate caring roles as well as their desire to have a fulfilling career. All of us right across the Government are committed to ensuring women can have fulfilling and decent jobs throughout their careers.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): In the Budget, this House increased Scotland’s block grant by £950 million. In spite of this, local councils in my area are facing service cuts, and increases in council tax and tax on their workplace parking. [Interruption.] May we have a debate in this place on local government funding? Although Scottish National party MPs may laugh about these funding measures, but my constituents in Alloa are facing cuts to their Leisure Bowl, constituents in Fiscross are facing threats to their primary schooling, and constituents in Perth and Kinross have to endure council tax increases because increases in funding from this place are not being passed to local councils in my constituency.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this point. It is an issue that a number of our Scottish Conservative colleagues have raised in this House, and the fact is that there is absolutely no need for further SNP tax rises, thanks to this Government in Westminster delivering a £950 million funding boost to them. It is absolutely vital that the Scottish nationalists recognise the importance of preserving and maintaining local services to all Scottish consumers and residents.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): May I add my voice to those wishing David Natzler all the very best for a long and happy retirement?

The all-party group on Heathrow expansion recently reported that the Department for Transport methodology for assessing major airspace changes is deeply flawed.
This has major implications right across the House for many constituents, including mine. May we have a debate or a statement on the report?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am not aware of the report the hon. Gentleman mentions, but I suggest that in the first instance he perhaps seeks an Adjournment debate so he can discuss it directly with Ministers.

**Douglas Ross** (Moray) (Con): May we have a debate about online dangers for young people? I have been contacted by a constituent in Moray concerned about growing participation in something called the Momo challenge: young people can be watching various social media platforms and messages pop up urging them to contact a number on WhatsApp which then sends them images and instructions on how to harm themselves and others. Unfortunately in some parts of the world this Momo challenge has been linked to young people taking their own lives. May we have a debate and allow the Government to explain what more we can do to protect young people and educate them about the scourge of these online dangers?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend raises an appalling situation; I have also heard of the Momo challenge, and the Government are extremely concerned about it. We have been very clear that more needs to be done to protect young people online, including from cyber-bullying and suicide and self-harm content, and internet companies do have a responsibility to their users. The forthcoming online harms White Paper will set out a range of legislative and non-legislative measures to keep UK users safe online, but I can say that organisations including the Samaritans, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and the UK Safer Internet Centre have said there is no confirmed evidence that the Momo phenomenon is posing a threat to British children.

**Kate Osamor** (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): The Leader of the House may be aware of a report by the charity Project 17, “Not seen, not heard”, released on 19 February this year which found that many children of parents whose immigration status means they are not entitled to mainstream benefits are living in extreme poverty and are left feeling socially isolated, distressed, ashamed and unsafe. Local authorities are legally required to support children in this situation through section 17 support under the Children Act 1989. However, the report finds that many local authorities are routinely failing to act and support the children. May we have a debate in Government time on this tragedy of children living in an appalling state of vulnerability imposed on them because of their parents’ no recourse to public funds status?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I share the hon. Lady’s grave concern about anybody who is put into the position where innocent children are disadvantaged, and I am concerned to hear about that report. I urge her to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can raise this issue directly with Ministers.

**Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): As a long-term former resident of Tanzania and chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Tanzania, I am a great admirer of that country and its people. I am also an admirer of the great work that President Magufuli has done to tackle corruption there, but I am increasingly concerned by the fact that a large number of opposition politicians are now in jail or on trial. May we have a debate on the importance of having a responsible opposition and a responsible Government who respect that opposition rather than putting them in jail and bringing charges against them all the time?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I believe that my hon. Friend lived in Tanzania for some years and is chairman of the all-party parliamentary group. I pay tribute to him for the way in which he has raised this issue. He is absolutely right to say that we in the United Kingdom will always stand up for democracy, human rights and freedom of speech, and I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise that particular issue directly with Foreign Office Ministers.

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The Tories in Scotland were fined a mere £400 by the Electoral Commission over a £100,000 donation of dark money to the party in the weeks before the 2016 Holyrood election. Does the Leader of the House agree that such a paltry fine is no deterrent at all? Does she also agree that, when breaking electoral law carries such derisory penalties, it makes it almost worth the risk for those who are minded to be dishonest? Will she make a statement on whether the Electoral Commission has enough tools at its disposal to deal more severely with those who break electoral law, which is the foundation of our entire democracy?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady will be aware that the Electoral Commission is independent, specifically to ensure that it can look in an unbiased way at any accusations, from wherever they come. We have Cabinet Office questions on Wednesday 13 March, and I encourage her to raise that question then.

**Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): May we have a debate on the governance of city deals and growth deals? As a Scottish Conservative, I am proud of the fact that we have so many city deals and growth deals in Scotland. They are worth billions of pounds, and they show what can be done when the UK Government, the Scottish Government and local authorities work together, but I am really concerned that every penny of the money that is invested should deliver the social and economic transformation that we need in Scotland in the cities that have been chosen for these deals. May we have a debate as soon as possible, and perhaps a statement from the Government on the governance of city deals?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I certainly share my hon. Friend’s great delight at the extent of the city deals that have already been negotiated with Scotland, and there are many others to come. The areas involved include Glasgow, Aberdeen, Inverness and Highland, Edinburgh and South East Scotland, Tay Cities, Stirling and Clackmannanshire, Borderlands, Ayrshire, and Moray. We can all be proud of these enormous achievements in contributing to the progress and development of the great cities in Scotland. I would certainly welcome such a debate, and I will see whether Government time can be found for one.

**Vernon Coaker** (Gedling) (Lab): I know that the Leader of the House gets this, but could she have another go at the Home Secretary? Will she ask him if...
Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Your tie is not as nice as the one you wore last week, Mr Speaker.

The Leader of the House told the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) that she knows where a whole range of Bills are. Where is my Bill to help families and refugees? This is the third time I have raised my Refugees (Family Reunion) (No. 2) Bill at business questions, and the Tory Whips Office say it is down to the stalling of one Whip—they seem embarrassed. At the third time of asking, will the Leader of the House acquit herself well and tell us what she has done, and what she will do, to help families and refugees by getting this process moving along? It would be appreciated.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is right to continue to press for his private Member’s Bill. I am sure he will join me in welcoming the fact that we have had Royal Assent for 50 private Members’ Bills since 2010 including, just in 2018, the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018, the Mental Health Units (Use of Force) Act 2018 and the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Act 2018. These are all important measures.

The hon. Gentleman raises the question of his own private Member’s Bill, and he will be aware that the Government support the principle of family unity and have helped to reunite 24,700 family members in the past five years. Our policy allows a partner and children under the age of 18 to join refugees here if they were part of the family unit before their sponsor fled their country.

The Government are proposing a new statutory duty across education, social services and health to tackle serious violence as a matter of public health. All these measures, including funding community groups that seek to get young people away from knife crime, will start to make a difference, but I think we all share his concerns.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I am contacted several times a month by understandably angry constituents who have received extortionate fines from private parking companies. The fines often arise from having been just five minutes late in coming back from their supermarket shopping. The signage is often questionable or incredibly discreet. Can we have a debate in Government time specifically about how to tighten up legislation so that these robbers, who often prey on the most vulnerable in society, can no longer impose such ridiculous fines?

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Leader of the House will know that next Tuesday is Shrove Tuesday, and then we have Lent. Can we try to do something about the political culture and how we all speak and relate to it? I stand in front of the Jo Cox memorial. During those 40 days, at least, can we remember to think about how we have more in common on so many issues? We have just had a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), my dear friend, who is under ghastly pressure from awful people on social media. Can we stop this nonsense? Has the Leader of the House read Quentin Letts’s so-called political sketch this morning in which he uses disgraceful language about people who work in this House? Can we have a different kind of mood in this place and in our country? Perhaps we could lead that change in these next 40 days.

Andrea Leadsom: I commend the hon. Gentleman for making that suggestion and I entirely support it. This is a matter for all of us, and I have made my position very clear. Just yesterday, I opened the all-party group on women in Parliament’s event on its sexual harassment report, making clear again my personal commitment to ensuring that everyone in this place is treated with dignity and respect. That includes on social media, where those awful people sit there abusing MPs for what they are wearing, what they said and what they...
did. It is absolutely disgraceful, and we are sick of it. We need to be the role model that we want to see, so I absolutely join the hon. Gentleman in saying, “Let’s be nice to each other during Lent.” That would be a fabulous thing to do.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): May we have a debate on how companies treat their staff? Some 360 Vodafone staff based in Berkeley Square in my constituency were told that they would have to relocate to Manchester, Stoke-on-Trent or Newbury, or lose their jobs. According to “STV News” a senior manager based in England was pictured posing with Irn-Bru and a “See You Jimmy” hat on. That just adds insult to injury for the staff in Glasgow, who are facing losing their jobs on poorer redundancy terms than those who lost their jobs just a few months ago. This is no way to treat employees. Does the Leader of the House agree?

Andrea Leadsom: From what the hon. lady is saying, it sounds as though the supposed joke was in extremely poor taste, and I certainly agree with her that when a business has to relocate jobs the greatest sensitivity needs to be paid to those who will have to relocate or lose their jobs. She is absolutely right in that regard, and she may well want to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can raise her concerns directly with Ministers.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Like many MPs, through my casework I have heard numerous stories of aggressive and inappropriate behaviour by bailiffs, often towards some of the most vulnerable. The Ministry of Justice has just closed a consultation on this issue, so may we please now have a debate, in Government time, about introducing an independent regulator for the bailiff industry and an ombudsman-style complaints procedure?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very important point. I understand that, as a member of the Select Committee on Justice, she has played a full part in trying to get to the bottom of exactly what is going on in this sector. I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate or a Westminster Hall debate, so that all hon. Members can share their views directly with Ministers.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): The regional prosperity fund is the Government’s regional investment policy for when Britain leaves the EU, but we do not know what it is. Will the Government please come to the House as a matter of urgency to make a statement so that we can begin to address the important issue of infrastructure investment across the UK?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman rightly says that that prosperity fund will replace some of the structural funds that we will no longer be party to once we have left the EU. There have been so many opportunities to debate our departure from the EU, and I am slightly surprised that he has not raised the issue in any of the debates we have had in recent weeks or at any of the Brexit questions, such as those we have just had. I encourage him to seek the next opportunity to debate the meaningful vote to raise his questions then.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): York is a very welcoming city. We welcome hundreds of international students—young people and children who stay with host families—to our city every year. However, those host families do not have any form of Disclosure and Barring Service checks, so there is a real safeguarding risk. May we have a debate about safeguarding loopholes, to ensure that all children and young people are kept safe?

Andrea Leadsom: First, may I say that I am not surprised to hear that lots of people flock to York to see that beautiful city? It really is a lovely place for a visit and I am sure that the many young people who go there thoroughly enjoy it. The hon. Lady raises an important point. Obviously, we would not want to limit the opportunities for young people, but it is an important point and I encourage her to table a written parliamentary question so that she can ask Ministers directly what more can be done to keep that balance between keeping the opportunity open and at the same time safeguarding children, which is vital.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On behalf of the Democratic Unionist party, I wish Sir David, the Clerk of the House, good health, a long life and happy times. I congratulate him on the story and photograph in The House magazine. If anyone has not yet read it—I am sure you have, Mr Speaker, along with others—they should do so.

In Uttar Pradesh in India on 7 February, 25 Hindu militants ambushed a prayer meeting in the home of a local church leader. They subjected some 40 attendees to verbal abuse and physical assault, resulting in six people requiring urgent medical attention. Bibles and other church property were also damaged in the onslaught. A source close to Christian Solidarity Worldwide has reported that the perpetrators threatened to kill the Christians if they continued to gather for prayer meetings. I and many others in the House believe in prayer—at prayer you can move mountains. How despicable it is that anyone should be killed or threatened with being killed for praying to God. There have been reports of similar incidents occurring in Uttar Pradesh. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement or debate on the matter?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. I understand that, as a member of the Select Committee on Justice, she has played a full part in trying to get to the bottom of exactly what is going on in this sector. I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate or a Westminster Hall debate, so that all hon. Members can share their views directly with Ministers.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for her leadership on the early years agenda, particularly through the cross-Government review that she chairs. I hope she will read and carefully

[Andrea Leadsom]

The hon. Gentleman raises the serious situation in Uttar Pradesh. It is vital that action is taken so that we do not see the situation deteriorate any further. The British high commission in New Delhi meets Christian groups and other minority communities regularly. On 24 January, the high commission expressed concerns to the Indian Ministry of External Affairs regarding the persecution of Christians.

If I may say so, the hon. Gentleman does a great job of raising the issue of religious persecution against whomever it takes place, and he is absolutely right to do so. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise this particular issue directly with Ministers.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): That is a very thoughtful response by the Leader of the House. If we are going to take this seriously, we need to give the early years agenda a lead Minister. It is currently a Department for Education responsibility, but we need a lead Minister to champion the needs of early years and the five early years priorities identified by the Government.
consider the Health and Social Care Committee report published earlier this week on the inquiry that I chaired into the first 1,000 days of life. Many Members share the Committee’s analysis that the first 1,000 days are the most important time for a developing body and brain. Might the Leader of the House find Government time to debate the issue further?

**Andrea Leadsom:** First, I can tell the hon. Gentleman that I have already read the report and I am delighted with it. I congratulate him on his excellent chairing of the inquiry. I am absolutely at one with him on the vital importance of that first period in a baby’s life, from conception to the age of two. I was delighted to be asked to chair the interministerial group. I assure the hon. Gentleman that the findings of his report will be taken into account very carefully. In fact, my office will contact his with a request for a meeting so that we can discuss the issue further.

**Jo Stevens** (Cardiff Central) (Lab): We have already heard the Leader of the House praise all those involved in Fairtrade Fortnight. This week, my office has been trying to help a Ugandan Fairtrade coffee farmer whose visit visa was turned down by the Home Office, despite her having sponsorship from the Welsh Government to come to the UK for the fortnight. We have managed to overturn that decision, but the Home Office turnaround time means that she will not be able to get here to participate in Fairtrade Fortnight. May we please have a debate as soon as possible on the performance and resourcing of the Home Office?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am really sorry to hear that; I can imagine it must be incredibly disappointing. I say again: congratulations to all those taking part in Fairtrade Fortnight. The hon. Lady raises a specific constituency issue; I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate or a Westminster Hall debate, because I know that a debate as soon as possible on the performance and resourcing of the Home Office!

**Angela Crawley** (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): Families in my constituency and throughout the UK rely on the Child Maintenance Service, but for both the paying parent and the receiving parent there are serious failures in the service. May we therefore have a debate in Government time on improving the Child Maintenance Service so that it really works for families?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady raises a very important point. It is vital that the Child Maintenance Service works in a fair way for families and I commend her for raising it. She will be aware that we have Justice questions on 12 March and I encourage her to raise her specific concerns then.

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The Hooton Park gasification site is currently being constructed just outside my constituency, but, despite representations from me and Unite the Union, the developers are refusing to apply the National Agreement for the Engineering Construction Industry terms. Those terms are vital to upholding standards in employment and training. Can we have a debate, please, about what more we can do to prevent the construction industry leading this race to the bottom?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I share the hon. Gentleman’s desire to see all workers, including those in the construction industry, treated fairly and, of course, within the law. He will be aware that the Government are fully committed to upholding workers’ rights and to improving them and, as we leave the European Union, to continuing to lead in improving workers’ rights wherever they are. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate because he has some specific concerns that he should raise with Ministers.

**Mary Glindon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): Last Friday, the Ministry of Justice admitted that the roll-out of PAVA spray to prison officers, which was due to start in January, will now be delayed for up to two years. In light of that broken promise and the current epidemic of violence engulfing our prisons, will the Leader of the House ensure that we have an opportunity to debate how best to protect our brave prison officers to whom we owe a great debt of gratitude?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right: we owe a huge debt of gratitude to our prison officers who face daily threats, intimidation and violence, and it is right that we do everything that we can to protect them. She will be aware that we now have over 4,300 more prison officers compared with two years ago, and that we are investing an extra £30 million in our prisons to improve the facilities in those with the most pressing problems. All of those things will contribute to making a safer workplace environment. She will be aware that we have Justice questions on 12 March, and I encourage her to raise her specific question then.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): My constituency is best known by many for its shipping history, whether it be John Brown and Company of Clydebank or Denny of Dumbarton. Next week, for the 78th year in a row, my community, including my family and friends, will gather once again to commemorate those we lost in what was described by a Minister in an Adjournment debate three years ago as the “worst blitzkrieg” in the history of the second world war proportionally anywhere in the United Kingdom. Does the Minister agree that it is now time that this House considered in a general debate in Government time the long-term economic and social consequences as well as the mental health consequences of aerial bombardment on the communities that suffered it across these islands? It is about time that we learned the lessons from it, given that the impact of it is felt by so many other communities across the world.

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman raises an incredibly serious issue and I pay tribute to him for all the work that he does in his community to commemorate the appalling bombardment. He is absolutely right to raise the fact that this is the reality for far too many people right across the world today with appalling consequences not just of physical injury and harm, but to mental health and the long-term effects of suffering from constant bombardment. I encourage him to go to the Backbench Business Committee and see whether there is an appetite for a cross-party debate on this subject so that we can consider together how we might better commemorate these appalling acts.
Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am sad to have to report to the House that Stoke-on-Trent City Council has developed a rather nasty habit of creating wholly owned companies, shovelling public money into them and then denying any proper public transparency or scrutiny of the decisions they make on spending that money. On Units and Fortior Homes in the city, we are now being told as MPs that freedom of information requests simply do not apply because they are commercial entities. Will the Leader of the House speak to her colleagues in either the Cabinet Office or the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and ask them to bring forward the necessary legislation to ensure that, where public money is involved—whether that be a wholly owned company or a company under contract—scrutiny will apply.

Andrea Leadsom: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman’s suggestion will be very popular. He is exactly right that the use of public money has to offer good value to taxpayers. Scrutiny is therefore essential so that people can see how their hard-earned taxpayers’ money is being used. We have MHCLG questions on Monday, and I recommend that the hon. Gentleman raises the matter directly with Ministers then.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): Can we have a debate in Government time on the Department for Work and Pensions policy of treating tax rebates as income for the purposes of universal credit? I have a constituent who was diagnosed with breast cancer and was on statutory sick pay, which triggered a tax rebate and stopped her universal credit. Surely that is not what we should be doing to people in such circumstances.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important constituency issue and he is absolutely right to do so. If he writes to me after business questions, I can take up his concerns with the Department on his behalf.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I have a constituent who works full time but receives universal credit to assist with childcare fees. The Leader of the House will be aware that any universal credit application effectively means an application for housing benefit so, although my constituent does not receive housing benefit, the mere mention of universal credit in paperwork has resulted in the refusal of her mortgage application. This did not happen under working tax credit. Can we therefore have a statement on what the Government can do to improve correspondence on universal credit and how they can engage with mortgage companies to prevent such situations from happening?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a concerning issue. I have not personally come across this problem, but if he writes to me following business questions, I can take it up with the Department on his behalf.

A Better Defence Estate

11.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the progress of our defence estate optimisation programme.

Let me first pay tribute to those who have worn and who wear the uniform both as reservists and regulars, as well as their families and loved ones, who provide them with so much support.

Today marks the start of the 100 days leading up to the 75th anniversary of more than 130,000 troops landing in Normandy on D-day—a critical turning point in world war two and a reminder, if ever one was needed, of the importance of co-operation and collaboration with our allies. It also reminds us that Britain should retain its own full-spectrum, hard-power capabilities if we wish to play a continued role as a force for good beyond our shores.

With a forthcoming spending review looming, I make no apologies for raising the issue of defence spending. The world is getting more dangerous and complex, and threats are increasing and diversifying. We now live in a multipolar world with competing powers and diverging views on how the world should look, and we are one of a few nations willing to have the desire and ability to step forward as a force for good.

Discussions about defence spending often focus on equipment, training and operations. I do not deny that these areas require investment, but I would not be doing my job as portfolio holder for defence people if I did not publicly make the case for looking after our armed forces community when they are away from training or the frontline. That means providing them with suitable, modern accommodation and basing requirements that will meet the changing needs of our armed forces community. The defence estate is the rock around which our armed forces revolve. It is the place where our brave men and women work, train and deploy from. It is where they are educated, where they exercise and where they rest.

As I have said in the House before, the defence estate has grown so large over many decades that it now accounts for 2% of the UK’s land mass. This means that it is unwieldy and too expensive to retain in its entirety, and parts of the estate are often in the wrong place so they are no longer fit for purpose. That is why, back in November 2016, this Government launched the defence estate optimisation programme—a long-term plan to modernise our facilities and bring them into the 21st century.

It has involved investing £4 billion to create a smaller, more modern and more focused estate. However, the complexities of regrouping air, sea and land assets and upgrading and building new facilities does take time, so this is a 25-year project. This statement provides an update relating to just 30 sites.

Last July, in a written statement, I updated the House on nine sites that had been disposed of. Since then, we have delivered a further three: the Defence Infrastructure Organisation at Aldershot; Fitzwygram House—the Royal Army Veterinary Corps Centre—in Hampshire; and Joint Supply Chain Services in Longmoor. In parallel, our military and infrastructure experts have continued to be busy conducting the necessary site assessments.
and consulting the local community to support the next phase of delivery and provide greater clarity for the next five years and beyond.

Today I can confirm to the House that over the next five years nearly £1.5 billion will be invested in our estate. This will help us to create regional clusters bringing people and capabilities closer to their training estates in new centres of specialism. In doing so, we will open up fresh opportunities for military families to find work, lay down permanent roots, and organise more stable schooling for their children. I can also confirm the updated status of 33 sites across our establishment. Since time does not permit me to go through the arrangements for each exhaustively, we have placed a table and timeline as an annexes to this statement in the Library of the House.

However, hon. Members will note that several significant adjustments have been made to the original programme. First, we have decided that five sites will be part of a phased withdrawal and disposal. They are Prince William of Gloucester Barracks, Venning Barracks, RAF Henlow, Chilwell Station, and RAF Halton. These facilities will now close several years later than originally stated, with, in some cases, units staying in place throughout that period. Next, we have assessed that five further sites originally earmarked for disposal will now be retained. They are Norton Manor Camp; Royal Marines Condor Airfield; Royal Marines Chivenor; MOD Woodbridge—Rock Barracks—and RAF Molesworth, which will continue to be used by United States visiting forces. The Secretary of State will visit Royal Marines Chivenor and Norton Manor Camp later today to meet local personnel. Finally, the closure of HMS Sultan, the home of the Defence School of Marine Engineering and the Royal Naval Air Engineering and Survival School, will now be delayed. These decisions have not been taken lightly but after months of rigorous analysis, and they reflect a clear-eyed assessment of the rapidly changing threats facing our nations.

We will continue to work closely with local authorities, the devolved Administrations and Members of Parliament to explore the best ways in which vacated sites may be used. We will do all we can to take into account local plans, infrastructure requirements and the environment. Hon. Members can rest assured that we will continue to keep Parliament fully apprised as our plans mature. At all times, our objective has been to strike the right balance between working with the community, achieving value for money for the taxpayer, and making sure that our armed forces’ operational requirements are met and that they can do their duty to protect our people and advance our prosperity into the future. I believe that the defence estate optimisation programme is getting that balance right and that we are on track to create the world-class bases that our nation needs. With that in mind, I commend this statement to the House.

11.48 am

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. I would like to wish the House and all members of our armed forces a very happy St David’s Day for tomorrow.

We all recognise that as time passes there is a need to modernise and adapt our defence estate to ensure that it is fit for the 21st century. It is now more than two years since the MOD first announced plans to close some 91 sites across the country. While Members in all parts of the House will want to consider today’s update in more detail, this statement does provide some additional clarity.

MOD facilities are not simply places where our armed forces work and train. Many are home to service personnel and their families, and many have proud histories and a special significance in their local area. The visibility that barracks and other sites provide is important in maintaining buy-in from the local populations, who are always immensely proud of their military heritage.

Given that so many sites act as a clear symbol of the armed forces in their local areas, has the Department considered the effect that these closures could have on recruitment? That is particularly true for reservists, who rely on facilities being within a reasonable travelling distance of where they live. Is the Minister concerned that closing sites that host reserves training could cut off opportunities to recruit and retain those personnel?

MOD sites also support local economies and provide employment to a large number of civilian personnel, many of whom have personal circumstances that would not permit them to commute long distances to work. Can the Minister set out what redeployment opportunities exist for civilian personnel who will be affected by these closures and what discussions he has had with the relevant trade unions?

I turn to the disposal of sites. The Government have previously proposed using more public land for affordable housing, and yet their record in that area is incredibly poor. Clearly this will not be an option for every site, but where it is, what discussions has the Minister had with colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government?

Has the Department implemented the recommendations made by the Public Accounts Committee, which advised the MOD to avoid “enabling private sector providers to earn excessive profits”, when companies such as Capita are involved in this process? What work has the Department undertaken to ensure that public money is not spent paying rent on a large number of empty properties when sites close, as has happened in the past?

Finally, the House will recognise the Minister’s commitment to “continue to keep Parliament fully apprised as our plans mature.” Given that the delay in closing sites will cause added uncertainty for many, when does he next expect to update the House?

Mr Ellwood: I welcome the hon. Lady’s tone and her general support in this area. She is right to talk of the bond that exists between any unit, garrison or base and the local community. Many of those bonds go back decades and even centuries. We are very conscious that upheaval will provide change and a little bit of instability and hence needs to be managed.

The hon. Lady touched on the fact that the plan for these 90 sites started two years ago and almost suggested that she wanted answers for the 90 sites in two years. It is a 25-year programme. There are lots of pieces to the jigsaw—for example, troops returning from Germany. When we vacate one location, we move personnel
somewhere else. We need to ensure that all those parts are in place, which is why there are sometimes delays, but those delays must be kept to a minimum.

The hon. Lady mentioned the housing targets. She is right to say that our Department can contribute to the challenge of meeting Britain's housing needs. In many cases, it is not the MOD that is the reason why the right houses are not being built, but the chronology of events. We announce an area to be liberated for housing, but if the local authority has not included that in its housing plan, it takes some time for that to happen. She is right that we should not renge on our duty to expedite this.

I want to stress that we are looking at not simply providing housing but building communities. Wethersfield is a great example. In many of the areas we are looking at, I am encouraging local authorities to look at providing jobs too. It is about a dual purpose—housing as well as areas for businesses, schools or academic facilities. We should not have a knee-jerk reaction and say, “Let’s build houses for the sake of it.” The hon. Lady mentioned the role of trade unions, which are an important part of this. The Defence Infrastructure Organisation works closely with trade unions, along with other stakeholders, to ensure that their voices are heard.

The hon. Lady touched on recruitment and retention. One reason that we are investing £4 billion over this period is to ensure we have places that are attractive to the next generation, who will look at them and say, “That’s the sort of place I want to work, train in and live in.” However, she is right to imply that there have been some challenges. I do not think this debate is so much about Capita itself, but it would be a missed opportunity for her not to mention that, and it has certainly been taken into account.

The hon. Lady touches on the issue, which I can add to, of where reserves will continue to train. Many of our reserve regiments and so forth use the regular facilities for their own purposes—I could add the cadets to that as well. It has very much been at the forefront of our minds to make sure that we do not lose the important asset of our reservist capability and our cadets simply because of the defence estate optimisation programme.

I would be more than delighted to meet the hon. Lady to discuss this in detail. I do not know when I will next update the House, but I assure her that when the next batch of changes is to take place, I would be delighted to come here and answer questions. I should add that, for right hon. and hon. Members who are affected by today’s events, a letter to them has been placed on the letter board with details of what is happening in their constituencies.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I welcome what the Minister said about the upcoming 75th anniversary of D-day? Are he and right hon. and hon. Members aware that the Royal British Legion is looking for veterans to make a trip to the Normandy beaches in honour of that anniversary? I hope right hon. and hon. Members will alert veterans whom they know to that opportunity.

May I ask the Minister what sort of financial model he anticipates for the development of some of these bases? Questions have rightly been raised in the past about the adequacy of the private finance initiative model. The legendarily close relationship between the Treasury and the MOD should be bringing forth something typically productive, and I wonder how we are doing in that respect.

Mr Ellwood: First, I am pleased that my right hon. Friend has mentioned the prospect or possibility of veterans returning to Normandy for the 75th anniversary. He obviously does not follow my tweets, because I have promoted this very thing, and the MOD is involved in chartering—[Interruption.] He is not on Twitter.

Dr Lewis: Life’s too short.

Mr Ellwood: My right hon. Friend does not do social media—very wise. I will send him a pigeon with the information.

Let me take this opportunity, if I may, to say that if there are veterans wishing to participate and to return to Normandy for this incredible anniversary, a facility has been made available by the MOD, working with Royal British Legion, and we very much look forward to it.

My right hon. Friend touches on the financial packages. He is aware that the PF1 model is being moved away from. We do seek recognition from the Treasury that, if it is not a financial vehicle that it wants to continue to use, we will need other support, and I hope that will be forthcoming in the spending review.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I agree with the Minister on the D-day landing commemorations. It would be remiss of me if I did not mention yet again during a defence statement the civilians who died in my home town in the Clydebank blitz. It is the 78th anniversary next week, when I will be joining my community at the mass grave in Dalnottar cemetery—one of two.

I am grateful to have had early sight of the statement. I am delighted, as I am sure other Members in the House will be, about the commitment to RM Condor. I know that my colleague Graeme Dey, the Veterans Minister in Scotland, as well as the local MSP, will be delighted as well.

Yet I have to say that we need to look at the recommendations in the National Audit Report, and the statement is less a commitment than an ostrich with its head stuck in the sand, given the complexity of the issues—not only housing and the estate, but the equipment plan—faced by the Ministry of Defence. In reply to the Opposition lead, the Minister mentioned communities, and communities being able to inform the debate on policy is also about being able to hear directly from members of the armed forces.

The issues that the estate has faced are complex, as the Defence Committee knows—the Chair is in their rightful place—because the Service Complaints Ombudsman for the Armed Forces raised these issues before the Select Committee this week. The biggest issue that members of the armed forces face relates to terms and conditions—money and the way in which they live. That is profoundly disappointing, as I know that last week the Minister stated in response to a question from me that he does not see members of the armed forces as employees. Will he reconsider the
Government’s position on the ability of members of the armed forces to engage with the Government, and on whether an armed forces representative body should be set on a statutory footing?

There is grave concern that, although some of these measures are welcome, numbers of armed forces personnel in Scotland are still 25% below the commitment made in 2014. Can the Minister say how this issue will lead to an improvement in the terms and conditions of the armed forces, for example in housing? If housing is to be brought to the fore, I hope that at least in Scotland it will meet the Scottish housing standard. If it does, we might find an improvement across the rest of the UK.

I noted that the Minister made no commitment about Fort George, and there was a lack of commitment to Rosyth, as well as the continued diminution of the RAF footprint in the highlands. Why are the Government opposed to an armed forces representative body that would assist them in understanding the terms and conditions that the ombudsman highlighted in the Defence Committee? Will the Minister guarantee the future of the RAF footprint in the highlands and Fort George as well as in Rosyth, and will he commit, as I asked earlier, to ensuring that housing for the armed forces in Scotland meets the 2015 Scottish housing quality standard?

Mr Ellwood: I welcome the hon. Gentleman’s questions and his party’s interest in these matters—perhaps we could meet and discuss them in more detail. He raised issues of representation that he has raised before, and our views on that issue have not changed. I will say that Scotland fares well from our defence posture as a representative nation. Our fast jets will continue to operate from RAF Lossiemouth, and the P-8As are being moved there as well. The Army is well represented at Leuchars Station, and there is Her Majesty’s Naval Base, Clyde—the hon. Gentleman will be thrilled to know that our nuclear deterrent continues to be operated from that neck of the woods, and indeed, all submarines will be moving to those quarters. He welcomes the continuation of 45 Commando at Condor, and if my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) is able to catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker, I hope that she will give her views on that. She has campaigned hard on that issue, and it was a huge pleasure to visit the marines there, and to see the real estate and its importance. I am pleased that we are able to retain that asset for the Royal Marines.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirming the spending review and defence spending. On the off-chance that the Treasury is listening, what message would he send it?

Mr Ellwood: I am sure that Treasury Ministers are glued to the monitors as we speak. My hon. Friend is right—everybody knows that I am very much in favour of collective responsibility and not speaking outside my brief, but I would not do my job in the forthcoming defence spending review if I did not mention the pressures on defence spending. The first line of the strategic defence and security review states that our economic security is dependent on our defence, and if we do not get our defence right we will have no economy or future prosperity. It is important that we continue to invest in security for air, sea and land, as well as in the new dimension of space and cyber-security.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): The Minister knows that I have grave reservations about the consolidation of the estate, not least because it could take a military family away from other communities across the country. That presents challenges in recruitment and in the general understanding of the military. How is the Minister engaging with communities and the wider military family, given that we have delayed some of these proposals yet again and are just providing more uncertainty?

Mr Ellwood: First, I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for the detail and energy with which she pursues these matters. It is important that we scrutinise these issues carefully. As I have said, there is huge engagement, not just with unions and so forth, but with other stakeholders, including the families federations. Operational requirements are hugely important, but we must also recognise the impact on local communities. We are moving towards more of a hub perspective so that we can consolidate our assets, save funds and liberate spaces for the necessary housing commitments, but we should not lose sight of what we are offering and of the need to ensure that it is practical and welcoming so that it encourages the next generation to step forward. I was privileged to speak in front of her all-party group on the armed forces covenant a few days ago, and I would be delighted to sit down with her and discuss these matters in more detail.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I warmly welcome the announcement from my right hon. Friend that RM Condor will remain an integral part of the defence estate. Securing its long-term future was one of my election campaign promises, so I am especially delighted with this result. When he replied to my recent Westminster Hall debate, he hinted that this might be the outcome, and it has been received incredibly warmly by both my constituents and the armed forces personnel at RM Condor. Will he commit to coming back up to Angus to hear about that positive result and to see the day-to-day work that goes on within the base, and may I encourage him to invest further in the base?

Mr Ellwood: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the energy and determination that she has put into retaining this asset. It was a huge pleasure to visit Condor a couple of months ago. If I was not here making this statement, I would be there with her to celebrate the news that we are keeping this important asset in Scotland. If there is an invitation there, I would be delighted to take her up on it.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): In my debate on 9 January on the long-term basing of the Royal Marines, I called for certainty for the Royal Marines in Plymouth—not only certainty for after the Government close Stonehouse barracks, the spiritual home of the Royal Marines, but certainty around where and when the new super-base for the Royal Marines will be built. Now we are not having that super-base in Plymouth, can the Minister set out why more uncertainty for the Royal Marines in Plymouth is
a good idea, and when will he tell us when the new base will be built, where it will be built and what units will be based there?

Mr Ellwood: I welcome the hon. Gentleman’s support for the Royal Marines as a whole—we have had a series of debates on these matters—but I should make it clear that there is certainty around where the 40, 42 and 45 Commandos will be. He is focusing on 3 Commando Brigade. I can assure him that it will remain in the Plymouth area—detailed analysis is being done on where—but I am conscious that it cannot remain in Stonehouse, which, as he appreciates, is no longer fit for purpose, much as there is a historical connection to the first purpose-built garrison headquarters in Britain. Its departure is a sad moment, but a decision has been made, and it is partly operational. I can give him a commitment, however, as I can to my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), that 3 Commando Brigade will remain in the Plymouth area.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I very much welcome the fact that the sale of Middlewick Ranges will be delayed by at least 12 months. Will the Minister commit to working with me and local stakeholders to see if, alongside some housing, an innovative approach that secures a significant part of Middlewick Ranges for a new country park could be explored?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend is right to highlight, as I did earlier, that this is not just about housing—I saw the Housing Minister here earlier; it is important to remember that we are building communities, rather than simply houses. There has been a delay—I appreciate his understanding—because we need to keep the ranges open for operational reasons, but it is only for one year. I would be more than delighted to meet him to see what more we can do to help him realise the vision of securing the proper offering that his community seeks.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I echo the Minister’s praise of armed forces personnel and their families. Does the estates strategy go beyond the United Kingdom to look at bases such as Cyprus, which clearly, with Brexit, is particularly affected? Would he be willing to comment on that? Closer to home—I am briefly wearing my invisible House of Commons hat now—is he aware of the issue of the MOD car park and the important role it might play in relation to restoration and renewal? We are quite keen to get our hands on it.

Mr Ellwood: I will resist the temptation to reopen the Brexit debate again, but the right hon. Gentleman is right to raise concerns about future confirmation of what is happening to our sovereign bases in Cyprus—I could add Gibraltar to that, as well. I served in both localities and I assure the right hon. Gentleman that all the necessary details have been addressed to make sure that they are not affected by any outcome of Brexit.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I note the Minister’s statement that the programme will allow the MOD to maximise the amount of land that could be used to build more homes and help more people on to the housing ladder. As the Minister is aware, the REEMA sites in Carterton already provide land for hundreds of homes.

I also note the Minister’s comment that in some areas local authorities are the block to development; that is certainly not the case in West Oxfordshire, where planning permission for these sites was given some 10 years ago. What is awaited is the money for the MOD to redevelop those sites. Can the Minister tell me whether West Oxfordshire, Carterton and the Royal Air Force can look forward to some of the proceeds from this announcement being invested in the REEMA sites in Carterton or whether there is a blockage elsewhere in the system that I need to explore?

Mr Ellwood: First, I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend has done in liaising with the local authorities and in representing Brize Norton, one of the most significant RAF garrisons across the country and dealing with the heavy lift. He is absolutely right to point out various plans to build extra housing. That has been delayed—not because of the MOD, but because the money was taken away from us, given changes to the private finance initiative. That is why I was surreptitiously hinting that I hoped that in the spending review another solution would be provided that allows any PFI project that has been removed to be put back in place, so that we can build the houses that my hon. Friend wants.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Although it is welcome that the closure of Towthorpe and the state of the art medical training facility have been delayed and also Strensall because of the Natural England report saying that the site is not suitable for development, it is disappointing that Imphal barracks is not on the list. That will have a major impact on the local economy in York; it is due to close in 2031. Will the Minister set out what steps he is taking to ensure that there is a proper economic assessment of the impact of the closure of the barracks?

Mr Ellwood: I have had the pleasure of visiting the units in the Yorkshire area. I visited 1st Division and the 4th Infantry Brigade. There will continue to be a huge military footprint in the area that the hon. Lady speaks of. She also mentioned the long-term plan—something that is going to happen a decade away. There is a reason for that: if they are to be moved, those assets need to be housed elsewhere. If that other place has yet to be built, or confirmed, there is a knock-on process. I hear what she says about wanting to expedite the process. [Interruption.] Whatever her long-term view is, I will be more than happy to meet her and discuss the issue in more detail.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): My constituents will be sad and disappointed that our friends the 30 Signal Regiment and the Queen’s Gurkha Signals will move from Gamecock barracks to Stafford. But equally, they will very much welcome the Royal Engineers and a number of medical regiments that are coming to the barracks. Will my right hon. Friend say more about what we are doing to improve accommodation for our armed forces personnel? When significantly more people are stationed at barracks, what more can we do to support local areas with provision such as school places?
Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend touches on two issues. First, there are the complex movement patterns when some assets move from one location and others move in. I am pleased that the overall position is neutral. He also touches on the standard of accommodation that is now expected. One of the reasons why recruitment will improve is that we are building accommodation that youngsters today expect. When I joined the armed forces, someone could end up in a place with eight or 20 people in one room; now people want their own accommodation, cooking facilities and wi-fi. They expect those sorts of things: if they are not there, they will not sign up. That is the standard accommodation that we are now building for our armed forces.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I thank the Minister for the information about the updated disposal date for Redford cavalry and infantry barracks in my constituency. I also join my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) in commemorating the imminent anniversary of the Clydebank blitz.

Although I am glad to get an updated date for Redford, I have written to the Government a number of times about the consequences of the disposal of Redford barracks. I was pleased to hear the Minister talk about consulting local communities. Will he meet me to discuss the need to release the land at Redford to the local authority for community benefit?

Mr Ellwood: I have written to the hon. and learned Lady and other hon. Members as well—there are letters on the letter board—but I will be more than delighted to meet her. She is absolutely right that there is a delay of three years in the disposal of Redford cavalry and infantry barracks. That has been to do with the complex sequencing and plotting that we are doing. There have also been some local planning issues.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I commend the Minister for his comprehensive statement this morning and his handling of this whole defence review. It is absolutely right that we should have a defence review, get good value for the taxpayer and have an estate fit for purpose for our armed forces.

My right hon. Friend will not be surprised that I am going to thank him in particular for his change of mind in keeping open Norton Manor camp in Taunton, home to 40 Commando, and for listening to the case that I have put, with others, in changing his mind. That means a very great deal to the whole community of Taunton, who are celebrating as we speak. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking all those involved but particularly 40 Commando for all the great work they do in keeping us safe? What they need to do that is the standard accommodation that we are now building for our armed forces.

Mr Ellwood: I very much welcome my hon. Friend’s comments. I am really pleased that 40 Commando will remain in the locality. I pay tribute to her hard work and dedication and the campaign that she has put forward as well. If the community are celebrating now, I hope she will soon be on a train to go down and join them. The Secretary of State is heading that way as well, to see what more needs to be done.

The camp needs some work, so I make clear my hope that the necessary funds will be provided to upgrade the camp. When diplomacy fails, we count on our elite forces such as our Royal Marines. We need to look after them, and that is why it is good that the camp is being invested in.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Bearing in mind the concerns of the communities who are losing these facilities, will the Minister assure us that the closures are operationally led rather than cost-cutting as a result of the Treasury’s handing the MOD a pensions bill that the Library estimates at £3 billion over the next spending period?

Mr Ellwood: I did mention that the closures were operationally led, but there are cost savings to be made. The huge pressures on the defence budget mean that we have to find better ways to make efficiencies. As I said before, 2% of UK land is owned by the MOD. Much of that is surplus to requirements: we do not need it. We have duplicate assets in different places. It is best to try to bring those together and hub them, but without losing sight of the fact that in some places assets need to be kept for reservist and cadet functions.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): May I ask for a meeting with my right hon. Friend to discuss the release of the MOD land at Forthside in Stirling, earlier than the planned 2022? My right hon. Friend will be aware that the land is of absolutely vital importance to the Stirling city deal for development, both commercial and residential. Would he consider, for example, releasing the decontaminated land in parcels?

Mr Ellwood: I will be more than happy to meet my hon. Friend. I should stress that the future use of any land is not for the MOD to determine. That is first handed to the local authorities, but there is a desire and certainly support from the MOD to make sure that whatever use is made is in the interests of the local authorities themselves and also governmental intentions in building housing.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The Minister is absolutely right to talk about the importance of links between local communities and their service personnel. Nowhere is that more true than in Chester. I welcome the delay in the proposed closure of Dale barracks. Will the Minister use that time to bear in mind the facts about Dale barracks in Chester: retention rates are higher; accommodation is of a higher quality; social infrastructure—for example, schools—is well built up to support our service personnel; and the operational footprint in the north-west needs to be maintained to maintain operational efficiency? Will he bear those in mind and see whether we can perhaps push that date back even further?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman, quite rightly and eloquently, describes the pieces of the jigsaw that make a successful garrison or Army unit in any locality: links with the community, operational purpose, and recruitment and retention. If we have areas that are high in those across the country, we certainly need to leverage that.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): We very much value the presence of three regiments, the Royal Signals, the RAF’s tactical supply wing in Stafford and other units. I have not yet seen the details, as the letter about further
[Jeremy Lefroy]

changes has not reached me, but can the Minister assure me that the Ministry of Defence will work very closely, as it has done very well in the past, with Stafford Borough Council and Staffordshire County Council to ensure that the integration of any new units is conducted in the best possible manner?

Mr Ellwood: I can provide that assurance. My hon. Friend underlines the importance of a strong bond between the Defence Infrastructure Organisation and local authorities dealing with what can be the quite challenging changes we are introducing.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his statement and for his very clear commitment to addressing many of the issues facing service personnel, including accommodation and finding work. I put on record my thanks to the service personnel of all three services for all they do. The Minister stated that employment for personnel and their spouses will be offered. We have had the opportunity over the past few years to speak to some of those families, so we know what the issues are. There are only so many job opportunities, however. Will personnel families be given priority? Will those jobs be in MOD camps or in local communities? Will there be local government involvement? Will efforts be made to place them where their camp can benefit both themselves and their local community?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point about what happens in succession and the support we need to provide. I can write to him in detail on what we are doing in Northern Ireland. He is aware that I have visited Northern Ireland on a number of occasions to ensure that the more nuanced approach we have to take there, because of the sensitivities, is conducted carefully as it continues to have an important military footprint with Aldergrove, Palace and Thiepval barracks, and 38 Brigade, which I know he supports.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): May I say how refreshing it is to hear my right hon. Friend speaking so knowledgeably to his own brief and say how genuinely pleased I am that he is remaining in government, because, without a dose of sarcasm, Madam Deputy Speaker, he is an excellent Minister and I want him to stay in post to do the valuable work he is doing? How does this strategy tie in with the need to provide affordable housing to our veterans?

Mr Ellwood: I hear the message first, but my hon. Friend raises an important aspect of looking after our veterans. I hope the whole House will join me in paying tribute to those who have worn uniform. Our duty of care does not simply end when they depart. We must make sure that they are looked after for the rest of their lives. There are charities and there are initiatives being looked at to see whether the new batches of housing coming online because of areas being liberated can be focused on providing housing for veterans. I think that that is well worth pursuing.

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): May I first say how much I welcome the Minister’s comments with regard to the 75th anniversary of D-day? It is fantastic that Portsmouth will be the national home of those commemorations. I am especially proud that my grandfather was a veteran from Portsmouth and left Southsea on his 17th birthday for Operation Overlord. The MOD’s recently published quarterly personnel statistics reveal a further decline in personnel numbers of all services for the eighth consecutive year. Can the Minister be more specific about how he is looking at the impact of the closures on recruitment?

Mr Ellwood: First, on the hon. Gentleman’s particular area, I think the whole House supports the fantastic events that will take place in 100 days’ time, and I join him in saying that Portsmouth can be very proud of the role it played in putting together such a fleet that participated in the event itself. On HMS Nelson wardroom, which affects his constituency, there are some issues to do with the masterplan for the Portsmouth naval base which we hope will be resolved. I hope that he will welcome that update. He talks about recruitment. We must conduct these changes with recruitment in mind. As I have stressed, we must make the kind of 21st century high-standard accommodation that youngsters expect. When they go to university, they see the sort of environment they expect to live in. We need to provide them with that. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) is no longer in his place, but in Stonehouse, for example, we still have British marines living in eight-man accommodation with a very lousy shower. That is not acceptable in today’s modern age.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): May I, too, associate myself with the Minister’s comments about the service of uniformed personnel and with the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) on the anniversary of the Clydebank blitz?

The Defence Secretary stated that Russian submarine activity in the north Atlantic has increased tenfold in recent years. It currently takes 24 hours for a ship to be scrambled to Scottish waters, which account for approximately 60% of UK waters. Will the Minister therefore commit to opening a permanent surface vessel base in Scotland, particularly given the increasing importance of north Atlantic security?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady is right to touch on the activities of Russia. It is investing hugely in all three arenas of operations, air, sea and land, but especially submarines. By investing in submarines, there is far greater submarine activity. We do not monitor the north Atlantic on our own; we do it as part of the NATO alliance. She is right, however, that we need the correct assets, which is one reason why our P-8 maritime patrol aircraft will be based at RAF Lossiemouth. I hear her call, and I would be delighted to meet her to discuss her ideas further.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): More than 4,000 of my constituents signed a petition opposing the closure of Woolwich barracks, evidence of precisely the bond that you, Minister, and other hon. Members have mentioned. The Minister knows that the decision to dispose of the site was finely balanced. In the light of the decisions he has announced in his
statement today, may I urge him to consider another adjustment and revisit the decision to sell off Woolwich barracks?

Mr Ellwood: I understand the hon. Gentleman is making a strong plea, and I would expect that from the constituency MP. I visited the barracks many, many times and know its history. It is not a part of today’s announcement in any sense, but again I would be happy to meet him to discuss his thoughts.

Point of Order

12.28 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I note that the remaining stages of the Financial Services (Implementation of Legislation) Bill [Lords] were announced by the Leader of the House this morning. We have had an email from the Public Bill Office to say that the deadline for amendments was the rise of the House yesterday. Now, we are all pretty good in this place at figuring out how things work, but knowing how to do something that I should have done yesterday is quite difficult. Is there anything that you can do, Madam Deputy Speaker, about this incredibly short notice, which gives us little time to table amendments, less time to see other people’s amendments and consider them, and makes it very difficult for us to scrutinise the Bill effectively in the House on Monday?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order and for giving me notice of it. The scheduling of business is a matter for the Government, not the Chair, but I can understand her slight confusion. I believe that the letter from the Public Bill Office may well have said that the formal deadline would be yesterday, but amendments can be tabled today. I am sure, having heard the concerns that I suspect other colleagues may share, that Mr Speaker will take those into account when making his decisions on the selection of amendments on Monday. The hon. Lady referred to the Public Bill Office. I recommend that she and other Members visit it for further information, because I know that the staff there will be very happy to assist her and any other colleagues who have inquiries.

BILLS PRESENTED

NORTHERN IRELAND BUDGET (ANTICIPATION AND ADJUSTMENTS) (NO. 2) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Karen Bradley, supported by the Prime Minister, the Attorney General, Elizabeth Truss and John Penrose, presented a Bill to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of Northern Ireland of certain sums for the service of the years ending 31 March 2019 and 2020; to appropriate those sums for specified purposes; to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources for those years; to revise the limits on the use of certain accruing resources in the year ending 31 March 2019; and to authorise the Department of Finance in Northern Ireland to borrow on the credit of the sum appropriated for the year ending 31 March 2020.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Monday 4 March, and to be printed (Bill 346.)

NORTHERN IRELAND (REGIONAL RATES AND ENERGY) (NO. 2) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Karen Bradley, supported by the Prime Minister, the Attorney General, Elizabeth Truss and John Penrose, presented a Bill to make provision about the regional rate in Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2020; and amend the Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Monday 4 March, and to be printed (Bill 347.)
12.31 pm

**Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Welsh affairs.

May I take this opportunity to wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and everyone in the House a very happy St David’s Day? Dydd Gwyl Dewi hapus. I formally thank the Backbench Business Committee for selecting this debate; it is really important that as a proud devolved country, we have the opportunity in this House to discuss issues that are pertinent to our constituencies and to Wales.

I thank colleagues from across the House for their support in securing this debate, but more importantly I want to give a big shout-out to one special friend who is no longer with us, Paul Flynn. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] If I referred to his book “How to be an MP”, which sits proudly in my office upstairs, I am sure it would say that one should never give another MP a shout-out, but Paul was not a traditional MP and I would say that one should never give another MP a shout-out, but Paul was not a traditional MP and I learned a lot from him after being elected. His firebrand speeches and his unstinting campaigning style will be sorely missed by many, but I am sure that some Government Members may be slightly relieved.

For me and many others, the work that Paul did on medicinal cannabis will never be forgotten, including by the tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of people that could benefit from it. The Elizabeth Brice Bill was cutting edge, and the legacy of Paul’s work has paved the way to changing the UK’s attitude to the use of cannabis for medicinal purposes.

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for introducing the debate and for the tribute she is paying to Paul Flynn. Does she agree that Paul would have been appalled by the situation for young children such as my constituent Bailey Williams? I know that my hon. Friend has done tremendous work with Bailey’s family through her work on medical cannabis. Paul would have been appalled that we can have a place in my heart, and that I would like to thank him for all his support and help.

Standing here and opening this debate makes me extremely proud to be a Welsh MP. Since I retook Gower in 2017 for Welsh Labour following a short hiccup, I have dedicated myself to serving my constituents, helping the most vulnerable in society and making sure that those who usually do not have a voice are listened to. My office works tirelessly on behalf of people who are being treated appallingly—who have continuing problems with personal independence payments, with universal credit, state pension inequality and immigration. The list goes on and I will continue to fight for them.

Last year, the St David’s Day debate was delayed by the severe weather caused by the beast from the east, but this week we have been basking in some glorious sunshine—maybe not today, but we have been. While the weather is enjoyable, it is a worrying indicator of the drastically changing climate that threatens the world. The Government have set targets for reducing carbon emissions and increasing the use of renewable energy to combat climate change following legislation from the EU, but as we have seen, they are not living up to those promises, particularly in Wales.

Since I have been in this place, we have seen the collapse of two major energy projects in Wales: the hugely ambitious tidal lagoon project in Swansea bay, and the Wylfa nuclear plant in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen). Does this not just show a disregard for the pressing issue of climate change and demonstrate the disdain that the Tories have for Wales? What commitment can the Secretary of State make to the people of Wales on how the UK Government will reduce the carbon footprint of Wales to protect our future generations? As a former teacher, I think that seeing pupils going out to protest about climate change is inspirational, and I give them my full support.

While we all look forward to really celebrating St David’s Day tomorrow, we know that the celebrations have been ongoing all week. Just yesterday saw a celebration at No. 10 that was apparently well attended. [INTERUPTION.] I say “apparently”, as we have only social media to go on, as the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State had forgotten to invite Welsh Labour and Plaid Cymru MPs to the event. [INTERUPTION.] Come on, we only make up four fifths of all Welsh MPs. I hope they had fun and did not forget to mention all the funding and support that the Welsh Labour Government have given to many of the companies that were there. I will welcome an invitation next year.

Support for many of our services has not been protected by the Tories. As we have seen and heard from our constituents, since 2010 police funding cuts across the UK and in Wales have had a huge effect on the work of the police.

**Jo Stevens** (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Specifically on police funding, I have asked many times for capital city funding for South Wales police. My constituency holds well over 400 events—royal events, political events and sporting events—every year, but nothing is forthcoming. Does she agree that just as with energy projects, the Tories cannot be trusted to fund our police properly in Wales?

**Tonia Antoniazzi**: I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution. That is very important. Many of us who were at the international match on Saturday got to see how many police are needed to keep people safe. I am
really concerned that this is a drain on the resources of South Wales police in particular, and we need to address this issue immediately.

The community teams of officers and police community support officers across Swansea and Gower work tirelessly, juggling shift work and family life, and I am particularly grateful for their excellent work. I am very fortunate to enjoy a close working relationship with these teams. I have been out on the beat to see their dedication to serving the community, including visiting local pubs—not to drink, but to promote anti-drink- driving campaigns in rural areas. Without a doubt, they are committed and hard-working and I recognise the challenges that they face in dealing with some of the biggest problems in 2019.

How many of us are aware of the number of officers and support staff that it takes to keep us safe at night? I was struck by that when I went down Wind Street in Swansea with PC Andy Jones before Christmas. The resources that the force puts into ensuring that match day at the Liberty Stadium is policed and monitored are astounding. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) has already spoken about Cardiff, so I shall move on, but that needs to be noted and it needs to be addressed.

Police forces face many challenges in providing care and support for the most vulnerable in Wales, and South Wales police are collaborating extremely well with all agencies. The police and crime commissioner, Alun Michael, has funded the groundbreaking Swan project, which involves the police and Women’s Aid working together to support prostitutes in Swansea. Those vulnerable women have nowhere to turn. They are in crisis. They often have drug problems and a history of adverse childhood experiences such as sexual abuse.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Does the hon. Lady agree that one way to give policing in Wales an instant cash boost would be to devolve it? There would then be Barnett consequentials, and instead of being tied to an England and Wales formula that penalises them, the Welsh police forces would be better off to the tune of £20 million.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I feel that I shall have to make a date with the hon. Gentleman to discuss his suggestion further. I do not entirely agree with it, but it would be good to have a discussion about it.

The Swan project is to be commended, and my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) has another vision that I totally support. Swansea needs a 24-hour crisis hub where our most vulnerable people can have access to all the services that they need in one place. Think of having a safe space to go if you are a victim of domestic violence; think of having a consumption room in the place as you can pick up your needles. We want to keep people off the streets and safe, and we need to work with our colleagues in the Welsh Assembly to deliver that and help those who need it most.

It is fantastic to see the beauty and splendour of my constituency being celebrated on moving billboards across London: at Paddington station, I believe. I hope that Members have seen the National Trust #PlacesMatter story about Mal, who had an accident at work which meant that he was unable to walk for five years. He says that when you go to Gower, you are blown away by it. The Gower peninsula just makes him feel alive. It helped him, and it helps many others. We should never underestimate the impact of our surroundings on our wellbeing. The beauty of my constituency, from Worms Head to the Llwyd Valley reservoir, can never be overstated.

Wales is obviously the most beautiful country in the UK—

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): In the world!

Tonia Antoniazzi: In the world; correct. It is the most beautiful country, from the striking and romantic coastline of Ynys Môn to the picturesque fishing village of Aberaeron in Ceredigion to the Afan Forest Park, a hidden gem in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock). We also have an unrivalled cultural history. We have the Welsh National Opera, Only Boys Aloud—who have been here today—Mike Peters MBE of The Alarm, Bonnie Tyler, and, of course, Goldie Lookin Chain. We also have poets galore.

Jo Stevens: Has my hon. Friend heard Goldie Lookin Chain’s fantastic tribute song to our dear friend Paul Flynn?

Tonia Antoniazzi: It is excellent, and I want to say thanks to Goldie Lookin Chain, because it was really cool.

Jonathan Edwards: Will my hon. Friend also commend Goldie Lookin Chain for playing the “Yes is More” pro-independence gig in Cardiff in the last few weeks?

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and—whatever.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): The hon. Lady omitted from that prestigious list Geoff Downes, of “Video Killed the Radio Star” and Asia, who is a constituent of mine. I am sure that she will not include him.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Marvellous—but I need to make progress. Many teachers have written to me to bring to my attention the significant cost pressures that Gower schools are facing as a result of unfunded increases in contributions to the teachers’ pension scheme. That is serious and damaging, and I want some answers. From 2019-2020, each school faces the prospect of having to increase its contribution. How can we expect schools to meet additional costs on that scale, over which they have no control? The Welsh Government and Swansea Council have made explicit commitments to ensure that all money that is released by the Treasury will flow directly to schools in Swansea, but what commitment can the UK Government give to cover the pension deficit and ensure that all my pupils in schools in Gower are given their fair share?

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): My right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) and I have written to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury about Flintshire County Council, and she has said, in a
letter to me, that responsibility for that is devolved to the Welsh Assembly, but financial responsibility—the financial contribution from the Government—is not. Is that not unfair?

Tonia Antoniazzi: It is completely unfair. I really would like to have some answers, because that unknown is causing instability when it comes to planning the future of our children's education.

I shall end my speech now. I look forward to listening to the debate and responding to it at the end. I wish everyone a happy St David's Day.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. This debate is well subscribed, and the next debate is also well subscribed. I would rather not impose a time limit, but if colleagues could speak for about six minutes, that would be very helpful.

12.46 pm

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi). I also extend my sincerest condolences to the family of Paul Flynn, and to all Paul's colleagues in the Labour party. I had known him for well over 30 years. He used to be my MP, and he used to come to my school when I was a sixth-former. I would try, and utterly fail, to catch him out with difficult questions. History seemed to repeat itself when he joined the Welsh Affairs Committee. He was an inspirational Member of Parliament, a true Back Bencher, who worked incredibly hard. He turned up to every Committee meeting, even when his health was making that difficult for him. We were both Council of Europe delegates as well.

I think that the best compliment I can pay comes from one of Paul's constituents, who described him as "a damned good constituency MP" who would always take up people's concerns. That comment was actually made to me by a member of Newport West's Conservative association. I think I need say no more than that.

Let me also thank all members of the Welsh Affairs Committee, past and present. In the nine years for which I have served on the Committee, it has been an absolute pleasure to work with everyone. We certainly have a wide range of political opinions, but most of our reports have featured a strong measure of unanimity in their recommendations to the Government. I think that that is because, outside the Chamber and the hurly-burly of politics, most of us—indeed, all of us—will always want to put the good of Wales first, and look for ways in which to support Wales and the Welsh people rather than dividing on political issues.

In the four minutes that I have left, I will canter through a couple of the issues with which the Committee has been dealing. The issue of the Severn Bridge was the first that I took up as Chairman, and there were various inquiries, reports and follow-ups on the subject. With the support of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales, we continued to maintain that the tolls were unfair, and were creating a brake on the south Wales economy. I was delighted when, earlier in the year, they were finally scrapped. If we are to see the full benefit, however, it is vital for the Welsh Government to get on with building an M4 relief road. Otherwise, we will simply see further congestion in the area of the Brynglas tunnels.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has paid tribute to the Secretary of State. Will he join me in also paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), who has campaigned for the abolition of the tolls since 2005? Should she not be congratulated on her achievement?

David T. C. Davies: In fact, the hon. Member for Newport East was a member of the Welsh Affairs Committee when that first report was produced some nine years ago, and I think that it was at her instigation that the abolition went ahead. I pay full tribute to her for that.

As I was saying, the advantages that will accrue from the abolition of the tolls will be greatly increased if the Welsh Government now get on with building the M4 relief road. I know that was the policy—or it certainly seemed to be—of the Labour Government in the Welsh Assembly, and I am sure the Government here will want to support them in that.

To be slightly more parochial, the booming south Wales economy, for which my colleagues in government can take much of the credit, has meant that there is a demand for housing in south-east Wales, which is causing further problems. I hope Ministers will be doing everything possible to get the local authorities together to build the Chepstow bypass, which is also urgently needed.

The Select Committee on Welsh Affairs obviously cannot do much in the way of culture, media and sport, which is a devolved matter, but there are areas where we can offer support, not least in cheering on the national side as we all did on Saturday, but on S4C too. We have produced numerous reports to try to ensure that there are no threats to S4C's budget.

I am also delighted that the Select Committee now enables anyone who wishes to do so to give evidence in Welsh. Debates can also now be held in Welsh in the Welsh Grand Committee, and I do not see why this cannot be extended further. I know that many Committee members would be quite supportive of it. There is no technical reason why we could not have debates on Welsh matters in Westminster Hall in Welsh, and I do not think there is any technological reason why a St David's Day debate in this very Chamber could not also be held in the medium of Welsh. Perhaps we could look at that over the next few years.

We have looked on many occasions at the issue of powers for the Welsh Assembly. I was on the losing side of a referendum: I campaigned against the Welsh Assembly but quickly realised it would be utterly wrong to stand in the way of something the people of Wales had voted for. That is why I am glad the Conservative party, rather than trying to overturn the result of that referendum in 1997, embraced it and realised we would simply have to go along with what the Welsh people wanted, because that is democracy.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman must then be very upset that the Prime Minister in 1997, after the referendum, voted against the Government of Wales Act.
David T. C. Davies: I was not here until 2005 so I will take the hon. Gentleman’s word for that. I do not know what the reason for that was, but it was very clear at the time that the Welsh Conservative party accepted the Welsh Assembly, and rightly so. I would suggest judging us by our deeds, not by words; judge us by the many extra powers we have granted to the Welsh Assembly over the years. One of those could be what we are looking at at the moment: devolving air passenger duty. I will not make too many comments on that prior to finishing our report, but clearly if there is an economic case to devolve APD to the Welsh Government, we should not stand in the way of that. I certainly do not see any constitutional reason why that should not happen, since we have already devolved income tax, land tax and all sorts of other taxes. There is no constitutional reason not to do it; if the economic case can be made, and it is fairly strong, we should not be afraid to devolve APD as well.

Jo Stevens: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that during the passage of the most recent Wales Act the Secretary of State refused to devolve APD to the National Assembly?

David T. C. Davies: I am sure the Secretary of State will, as he always has done, take great interest in the report we are producing; we have not finished it yet so I can only say that I have heard strong economic arguments in one direction. There may be strong economic arguments not to devolve APD; we will have to wait for the findings of the report. I pay great tribute to the Secretary of State for Wales, who has always read carefully through the recommendations of our reports and taken them very seriously.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Is not one glaringly obvious solution to the APD question just to abolish it entirely for all nations? It is an unfair tax, it hinders tourism, and there is an economic boost to be had for the whole United Kingdom in bringing down APD.

David T. C. Davies: There is a very strong case for that as well, but I am deviating now slightly from the subject of Wales and running over my six minutes.

I cannot really not mention Brexit. The fact of the matter is that we are not going to get any consensus around this at all. I am strongly in favour of Brexit and the people of Wales have voted for Brexit. I have a slight regret that we did not go off to Brussels a few years ago and make it very clear that we were not going there as supplicants; instead we should have made it clear that the people of Britain, and the people of Wales, had voted to leave the European Union and if there has been a failing it has been a failing of the EU in not being able to instil the confidence it wants in the people of this nation.

I hope all those who feel there will be some detrimental impact if we leave without a deal are willing to back the Prime Minister. I believe that we must be out by the end of March. I hope all Ministers and all Cabinet Ministers are aware of that, and aware that if they want our support for difficult policies, we need to be out, with or without a deal, by the end of March.
[Albert Owen]

Government since then. We have had reform Bills—electricity reform, market reform, retail reform—but we have not had a coherent policy. Wales is suffering as a consequence of that, because many major projects were earmarked for Wales, with lots of time and effort from the private sector, the Welsh Government and the UK Government, yet the end product has not materialised as it should have.

I have argued for many years that we need a proper formula, particularly for first-of-a-kind energy projects, for example in marine technology, because the auction system—the contracts for difference—that the Government have put in place does not help new forms of technology break through. We have great tidal resources around the coast of the UK and Wales—the west coast has some of the best tidal resources—and we need to work together to make things happen.

The Secretary of State has been very good with me in recent weeks and we are working together to get a new formula, but now we want not only a formula but an action plan. We want to be able to deliver on these projects, because we need to get the carbon emissions down and to meet our targets. We will not do that by prevaricating or by blaming the private sector for its financing. We need proper Government investment, in financial as well as policy terms. We should not leave this to the auctions; we need coherent planning.

I also want to talk about the job losses that we have seen in north Wales in recent times. I mentioned this yesterday, and I am grateful for the response that I received from the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams). Rahau Plastics in my constituency town of Amlwch is a family company that is based predominantly in Bavaria, but it has global reach. It has been in Amlwch for 40 years, but it is consolidating the work that is done at that plant in central Europe.

There is a pattern developing, whereby international companies that have their bases across continental Europe and the United Kingdom are consolidating their workforces and their businesses in the European Union, because they know that the single market delivers. They are very polite about it and say that this is not simply down to Brexit, but I say to the Secretary of State that we cannot have companies based in countries such as Japan, which have direct agreements with the European Union, pulling out of Britain like this. Our workforce, our commitment and our end product are all good, but there is a fault, and that fault is the uncertainty of Brexit, pure and simple.

I want to move on to the North Wales growth bid. I congratulate the Secretary of State on working with the Welsh Government and local government on this important issue, but I want to say to him directly that there should be greater input by north Wales MPs. Simply leaving it to the councils is not good enough, because their resources are being cut and they have different responsibilities. As north Wales MPs, we have a strong mandate here and we want to work with the Treasury, the Government, the Welsh Government and local government to make this deal happen. This is not about being top-down; it is about working in partnership to deliver for the people of north Wales.

Following the suspension of the Wylfa Newydd power station, many of the projects are now in jeopardy. The Secretary of State and the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy are joining us for a meeting next week to discuss this. It is hugely important that the gap created by the suspension of that £20 billion project should be filled. It could be filled with quality jobs in renewable energy, in improving our rail infrastructure and in many more projects. I want to work with the Secretary of State in focusing on that, but I want a commitment from him that he will fight our corner in Whitehall and that we will get more money as a consequence of that suspended project. The private investment that has been lost needs to be topped up, and that could be done through the mechanism of the North Wales growth bid. The Welsh Economy and Transport Minister, Ken Skates, has said that he would match any moneys that come from the United Kingdom Government. We want to see action from this Government, not just warm words.

I understand the time constraint on this debate, but I want to mention Brexit very briefly. I have been arguing in this House for more than two years about the Irish dimension to Brexit and its effect on the port at Holyhead. The former Secretary of State just said, “Don’t worry, it will be simple”, but we are coming up to the eleventh hour and we are still arguing about the Irish backstop. If we treat one part of the United Kingdom—that is, Northern Ireland—differently and allow it to have alignment with the single market and the customs union, that will have an impact on Welsh ports as well as on ports in Scotland and England. Those countries will lose out as a consequence.

I want this message to go out from Wales to the Prime Minister: look at what is happening in Wales, listen to the Welsh Assembly and to Welsh MPs, do not be blinkered and do not pander to one side of your party. Start speaking up for Wales, because it is an integral part of the United Kingdom. We are pioneers and leaders, and I am proud to speak in this debate.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. We are not doing very well so far, are we? If we cannot stick to six minutes, I will have to impose a shorter time limit, so I urge colleagues to make an extra special effort.

1.4 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): I shall try to adhere to your quite reasonable constraints, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a great pleasure to participate in this annual debate. As the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), whom I congratulate on securing it, said, it gives us an opportunity to celebrate all that is good about Wales. Unlike the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), whose remarks were rather Eeyore-ish, I want to celebrate what this Government are doing for Wales, and especially for north Wales.

In particular, I would like to pay tribute to the Government for their total commitment to the North Wales growth deal, which was pioneered by George Osborne and has been taken forward by this Chancellor,
with an announcement in the last Budget of £120 million-worth of funding. That funding has now been matched by the Welsh Government. This is a huge opportunity for north Wales. It gives us the opportunity to put in place transformational programmes that will benefit not only this generation but the generations to come. It is extremely important that the Government should continue to do what they are doing at the moment—that is, not only listening to local government but working with Members of Parliament. The Government have been working extremely closely with the all-party parliamentary group on Mersey Dee North Wales, which is chaired by the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas), and listening closely to what north Wales MPs think.

We are now arriving at the moment when the design of the growth deal is coming to fruition, and we should be considering what the transformational projects should be. I believe that infrastructure, particularly digital infrastructure, should be the key to this. That will be the key to our future economic growth. Historically, north Wales has been at a disadvantage in that regard, but that disadvantage will shortly be overturned by 5G, which will bring in gigabit speeds right across the country, including the difficult-to-reach areas of north Wales.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I understand the need for technology to advance in Wales. Our geography means that broadband cannot get to those most difficult areas, but has the right hon. Gentleman thought about the impact on people of the electromagnetic fields? I am concerned that we are throwing up masts that are larger than ever before, willy-nilly, without thinking about the people who choose to live in areas with no wi-fi or 5G.

Mr Jones: All I can say is that most of my constituents, particularly the farmers, are desperately keen to have access to the internet, which has been patchy so far. Clearly, we have to take health considerations into account, but that is what we rely on experts for, and I am entirely happy to accept the expert evidence. I urge the Government to listen to experts such as the Deeside Business Forum, which is calling for high quality broadband infrastructure to be put in place as part of the North Wales growth deal.

The other issue that I want to raise is essentially a constituency one, but I believe that it has wider implications. It concerns the sea defences at Old Colwyn in my constituency. Two Members have mentioned climate change so far, and there is no doubt that coastal erosion is going to become an increasing problem. In Old Colwyn, we have a significant problem of crumbling sea defences. In February last year, the promenade there was badly affected by high seas. It has now been repaired, with contributions from Welsh Water, but the engineers tell us that the sea defences are now in such a parlous condition that they are in danger of being swept away into the sea. This is more than an issue of the promenade at Old Colwyn, because the sea defences at Old Colwyn also protect the main sewer for Colwyn bay, the main London to Holyhead railway line and the A55 main trunk road to Holyhead. If these sea defences are compromised to the extent that they are destroyed, there would be an immediate and serious environmental incident in the Irish sea, there would be the potential loss of that important rail connection between London and Holyhead, and the A55 would be closed, too.

Everyone agrees that the defences need repair, and the cost is estimated at some £37 million. The problem is who actually pays the cost. I have been in correspondence with the responsible Welsh Government Minister, who has said that, although coastal defences are a devolved competence, the Welsh Government will not contribute to the cost of repair if the defences do not protect houses or dwellings.

Welsh Water has spoken optimistically about a contribution but, of course, it requires others to contribute, too. Network Rail has very few funds available to contribute to the repair. Conwy County Borough Council, the responsible local authority, has no capital-raising powers, so it cannot pay for the repairs, either.

We remember what happened in Dawlish five years ago, when the railway line was swept into the sea, and the chaos it caused on the south-west peninsula. As we speak, the whole north-west Wales economy is in danger of being affected by a serious incident in Old Colwyn. I ask Ministers to give consideration to that and to seek to work with the Welsh Assembly Government, and with all the other interested parties, to try to get these defences repaired.

This problem affects my constituency but, because of climate change and coastal erosion, it will affect many other constituencies right across Wales. I believe this is a matter that requires priority attention, and I hope Ministers will do all they can to try to find a way forward.

1.12 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in today’s debate at a particularly happy time for all Welsh Members, following Saturday’s sensational try by Josh Adams that propelled the Welsh team to the top of the Six Nations table. I have fingers, toes and, frankly, everything crossed for a Welsh grand slam, and I know the whole country is firmly behind our team and cheering them on.

I will be brief, and perhaps disorderly, in thanking the choir in the Public Gallery, Only Boys Aloud, for giving us a wonderful performance earlier today.

As others have done, I pay a personal tribute to our late friend and colleague, the former hon. Member for Newport West, Paul Flynn. His loss is a painful one, and it will continue to be felt on these Benches and across Wales for some time to come. Paul truly was a giant, both of Welsh politics and of our Welsh Labour movement. He leaves an unfillable space in this place, just as he does in the communities he served with such wit and passion across Newport West. We will miss his courage, his keen sense of humour and, above all, his determination to do what he believed was right for the people he served, however unpopular or unfashionable that may be.

Sharp, often outspoken, always articulate, occasionally contrary and of peerless intellect—Paul was all these things. This House, and our country, has lost a compassionate, independent champion for his constituents. I would argue that the term “honourable gentleman” could have been coined with Paul in mind. Even as his health was failing, he fought for his people and his principles with the zest, tenacity and effectiveness that were his trademarks. At a time when the public’s trust in politicians and our political institutions is so low, it is
[Chris Elmore]

an even greater blow to lose someone whose ambition and achievements soared so high. My thoughts and deepest sympathies continue to be with his wife, Sam, and his friends and family at this difficult time.

Likewise, I know that colleagues from all parties in the National Assembly for Wales are still coming to terms with the immeasurably sad loss of Steffan Lewis. I first met Steffan when we were both young Assembly researchers and, although we were serving politicians of different political colours, he was unfailingly courteous and engaging, and even then he showed the gentle effectiveness that became his hallmark.

Steffan’s passing at such a terribly young age must remind all of us who are still fighting to improve the lives of our constituents that, through our common beliefs, passions and ideas, we can achieve so much more than through the “Punch and Judy” theatrics that too often typify our politics. That is the style of politics Steffan embodied in life, and it should stay with all of us in his passing. My thoughts continue to be with Steffan’s family, friends and Plaid Cymru colleagues in this Chamber and in the Assembly.

This year has seen a significant amount of change in Welsh politics, most notably with my friend and constituency neighbour Carwyn Jones stepping down as First Minister after nine years in the top job. Carwyn was that rarest of political beings, someone people not only trusted to run their country but with whom they would also happily enjoy a pint. An outstanding leader of Welsh Labour and the Welsh Government, his legacy is a strong one, rooted in Labour values and delivered against almost a decade of unrelenting Tory austerity. I place on record my support and good wishes to our new First Minister and Welsh Labour leader, Mark Drakeford, in continuing the work of delivering for the people of Wales.

Members on both sides of the House will know that one of the issues I am particularly passionate about is rail infrastructure—I often bore Members to death with my constant talk of rail infrastructure—and one of Carwyn’s greatest legacies is the massive investment being pumped into the new Wales and Borders franchise through Transport for Wales.

The Welsh Labour Government are investing a whopping £5 billion in our rail network, with £1.8 billion invested to ensure that all trains are replaced with new rolling stock by 2023. Crucially, these are Welsh solutions, designed in Wales to benefit Wales. Half of these trains will be built in Wales, providing skilled employment opportunities and delivering a world-class service of which passengers can be proud.

This bold, innovative and well-resourced approach stands in stark contrast to the ongoing rail disaster being overseen by the UK Department for Transport and the Wales Office. From the scrapping of rail electrification to the meagre amounts of money being allocated to Wales for rail safety improvements and network upgrades, their “great train robbery” shows how little respect the Tories have for Wales.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend makes a valid point about train services in Wales. I look forward to that new investment, particularly in services to Penarth and throughout my constituency. Will he join me in welcoming the fact that a brand-new station will be built in St Mellons in east Cardiff? That is the sort of investment we need, instead of the Department for Transport’s shambles on the Great Western main line.

Chris Elmore: I agree with my hon. Friend, and one of the most frustrating things is that the Secretary of State makes bold announcements about railway infrastructure investments and plans for Aberystwyth and Carmarthen without putting any investment into the railway infrastructure that currently exists. [Interruption] He can shake his head all he likes, but he has made those statements publicly.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): On that very point, the Secretary of State must recognise and accept that investment in infrastructure in Wales is the UK Government’s responsibility, and there has been historical underinvestment in the railway infrastructure in Wales. He should be there to argue Wales’s case.

Chris Elmore: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I would add that Wales has 11% of the railway infrastructure and has had only 2% of the funding since 2010, which is a shocking failure of the Conservative Government and, indeed, of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government before them.

While the Welsh Labour Government are building a transport network fit for the future, the UK Government seem intent on flying a white flag and accepting the status quo where Wales is concerned. I will not dwell on this for too long, as Ministers and the House clearly know my views, but let me pose this question: if austerity really is over, when are we going to see the investment in the non-devolved parts of our rail network for which many Labour Members have been calling for years?

To give two small examples—Members have heard these examples many times—I have long campaigned for the closure of the dangerous level crossing at Pencoed and for much-needed improvements to the Tondu loop on the Llynfi Valley line in my Ogmore constituency. Although Wales Office officials, after three years of my complaining, are at last engaging, both I and my predecessor, Huw Irranca-Davies, have witnessed a laughable passing of the buck as to where the responsibility for this vital work lies. I fear that this buck passing has suited the Government’s continued austerity agenda. If Ministers are true to their words about ending the spending squeeze, let us work together and get these vital works done at the earliest possible opportunity.

Of course, the most significant issue facing Wales in the immediate and long-term future is Brexit. I have spoken previously of my fear that no single Brexit scenario will deliver a better future for Wales or the many wonderful communities that make up my Ogmore constituency. When the UK Government’s most positive analysis of the various Brexit scenarios is that Wales’s gross value added would be moderately lower than it is today, it appears to me as though we are setting a very low bar for ourselves and failing to clear even that. With the real threat of a no-deal Brexit or further pandering to the European Research Group, the Welsh Secretary and the Prime Minister should have the courage of their convictions to go back to the people to seek their
consent for this course of action. When the facts change—or, in the case of the 2016 referendum, when the endemic falsehoods are exposed—it is only right that my constituents and the wider British public get to rubber stamp our next course of action. To the people who say, “Wales has spoken. Wales has voted leave”, I simply say this: what do you have to fear from being asked to look at this question again? I completely respect the many, many reasons why people voted to leave, and if one message comes from today’s debate it should be this: we must start addressing the real concerns many leave voters had with our political system, because nearly three years after the referendum I fear we have yet to scratch the surface.

It feels as though Wales, like the UK as a whole, is at a turning point. This is not a crossroads or a simple T-junction; there are multiple paths Wales can take in the near future, and it is essential that we choose the correct one. It is fundamental that we continue to be an outward-looking, internationalist nation that looks after its citizens and is welcoming to others who choose to make their life in Wales—without exception. Where we see injustice, where we see our communities suffering, we must continue to be the positive and outward-looking nation that Wales has always been.

1.21 pm

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) for working hard to secure this important debate. It has been a good week for Wales, bathed in warm sunshine and the afterglow of a stunning and historic victory on Saturday. Wales is a truly blessed and happy nation in this St David’s Day week.

I wish to use my brief remarks this afternoon not to raise concerns and problems affecting my constituency, as I have used other opportunities in the Chamber this week to do that, but to talk about things that makes Wales great in 2019. So I will be making some unalloyed positive remarks in the St David’s Day debate. Things that make Wales great No. 1: Welsh sport. I make no apologies for making this my starting point. I love sport as entertainment. Anyone who watched the game on Saturday will know that “That’s Entertainment”, in the words of the Jam. But sport in Wales is so much more than just entertainment: it is a source of employment, skills and volunteering opportunities; it is a vehicle for social cohesion and national ambition; and it is a tool for tackling poor mental health and for leveraging inward investment. I truly believe in the power of sport to transform lives and boost our economy. This is really important for us in Wales, as a smaller nation, where our victories really matter to us. Whether we are talking about the Welsh football success at Euro 2016, Newport knocking Leicester out of the FA cup, the victory on Saturday or Geraint Thomas winning the Tour de France in 2018, these are things that really matter to us. It is not just about making us feel good; one of the keys to Welsh success in the years ahead is investing in sport, for all the reasons I set out, and using sport to help make Wales a stronger nation. In Wales, we are also closer to our sporting heroes than people in England perhaps are, and I sometimes try to explain this to my English colleagues. We see our sporting heroes in Wales in the street. We sometimes see them in the pub or at motorway service stations. They live among us in Wales. That is really important, and it brings me to my second point.

Things that make Wales great No. 2: community. The spirit of community in Wales is very strong and positive. It is a bit of a cliché to say it, and we sometimes hear people from the north of England say similar, but Wales is a friendlier place—I genuinely believe that. In 2019, it feels as though we have shaken off some of the stuffy insularity or curtain-twitching judgmentalism that Dylan Thomas used to rage about and hate, writing about it in “Under Milk Wood”. In 2019, Wales is an open, tolerant, caring, welcoming place.

Stephen Doughty: I completely agree that community is one key characteristic of Wales and what makes it great. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that one of the ways in which communities come together is through music? We have Only Boys Aloud here today in Parliament and they have been singing in the St David’s Day service; they have been taking part and they are making a huge difference in communities up and across Wales.

Stephen Crabb: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that. I have heard that choir sing on many occasions, and what a great bunch of guys they are. In terms of using culture as a tool for social mobility and ambition, they are a hallmark of Welsh success. This spirit of community shapes our politics and society in Wales. Whether someone comes from a Welsh Tory, Liberal or Labour tradition, their politics tend to be more communitarian, rather than individualistic. That brings me to an important point about Welsh participation in this House of Commons, which I flag up to the Secretary of State. If the boundary review goes ahead in the way it is shaping up, the Welsh voice in this UK Parliament will be smaller and that Welsh political tradition, which has helped to shape our UK politics, risks being diminished.

Things that make Wales great No. 3: our landscape. The hon. Member for Gower has spoken passionately about her constituency and how stunningly beautiful it is, and she is absolutely right; it comes in just behind Pembrokeshire in the league table of beautiful constituencies around the UK. We are truly blessed with some stunning landscapes. This is not just about saying what a pretty postcard it makes; the outdoors in Wales is the source for outdoor education, learning about the environment and promoting important messages about climate change. I want to use this opportunity to pay tribute to the Darwin Centre in my constituency, which, for the past 10 years, has pioneered outdoor education in the areas of science and environmentalism. I pay particular tribute to its outgoing director, Marten Lewis, who has revolutionised education in Pembrokeshire, using the outdoors as an educational tool.

Things that make Wales great No. 4: the Welsh men and women who serve in our armed forces. There is an important historical tradition of Welsh men and women serving in all branches of the armed forces. I watch the film “Zulu” every year and have a chuckle at the depiction of Jones 1 and Jones 2 in that film, but our having this rich tradition is an important point. I have concerns about the way recruitment is developing in our armed forces, with the changes to the recruitment processes
and the closures of some recruitment offices. I have concerns about some potential changes to the armed forces footprint in Wales. We do not want to risk reducing the important contribution that Welsh men and women make to our armed forces.

Finally, I come to things that make Wales great No. 5: our language. I say that as someone who does not speak Welsh. I have made three serious attempts at trying to learn Welsh, but I grew up on the wrong side of the Landsker line in Pembrokeshire. Many Members here will know that that is the 1,000-year-old cultural and linguistic line that divides Pembrokeshire, which was put in place by the Flemish lords who came in on the back of William the Conqueror. On Friday, however, I had the huge privilege of visiting a brand new Welsh-speaking school in Haverfordwest, Ysgol Caer Elen. Haverfordwest has traditionally been an English-speaking town, but a new generation of Welsh speakers is coming through and that is a really positive thing. My final comment is a message to those people on social media and elsewhere who moan about the costs of bilingualism and about the Welsh translation of English place names in Wales. My message to them is: get over it. The language is a really important thing that roots our nation back to ancient and mysterious times, and that is a great thing. Happy St David's Day.

1.28 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch, Madam. Ddirprwy Lefarydd. It is a delight to follow the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) and his singing the praises of bilingualism and the other great points of Wales. I also wish to add my voice in expressing respect for those colleagues whom we have lost: Paul Flynn, who was so welcoming to me, as he had been to everybody here; and Steffan Lewis, the Assembly Member whom we lost at the desperately young age of 34. I greatly appreciate the fact that mention has been made of him. He was a great politician and a great man, whose loss we definitely feel in Wales.

I extend my sincerest thanks to the schoolchildren of Ysgol Gymraeg Llundain and Only Boys Aloud. Those of us who were lucky enough to be there this morning know that they sang absolutely wonderfully at this morning's St David's Day service. Only Boys Aloud's rendition of “Nearer my God to Thee” will remain with me. Mae eich gwlad yn falch ia wn ohonoch chi—your country is very proud of you.

This St David's Day, we celebrate our nation, its culture, its people. We all know that Westminster continues to recognise Wales's contribution to the United Kingdom; however, we cannot simply close our eyes to the fact that Westminster's contribution to Wales still leaves us very much wanting.

Cyfiawnder—justice. Some Members of this House may not be entirely familiar with the medieval Welsh ruler Hywel Dda. His name is particularly linked with the codification of traditional Welsh law, which was henceforth known as the laws of Hywel Dda. The latter part of his name, Dda, or da, translates as “good”, and refers to the fact that his laws were perceived as being just that: just and good. In fact, one sees in them compassion rather than punishment, common sense and recognition of the rights of women. Fast forward to the 16th century. The last recorded case to be heard under Welsh law was in Carmarthenshire in 1540—four years after the 1536 Act of Union, which stipulated that only English law’s writ would run in Wales.

Since then, we have seen the coming of age of devolution, and this year is of course the 20th year of the National Assembly for Wales. Wales has had for 20 years its own Senedd: a Parliament and legislature, creating laws in relation to health, education and the economy. However, cyfiawnder—justice—or the lack thereof, continues to be controlled by Westminster. Although my party's ultimate aim is to restore the true meaning of cyfraith dda—good law—hanging to Wales the reins over criminal justice in its entirety, the crux of my contribution today will focus on the more immediate shortcomings of Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service and opportunities for improvement under the current model. Indeed, the Welsh Affairs Committee is currently holding an inquiry on this very subject that is due to finish soon.

The prison estate in Wales is currently controlled, managed and paid for by the Ministry of Justice, while the responsibility for providing healthcare, education, housing and emergency services sits with the Welsh Government—without extra funding from Westminster, of course. The incoherent interaction between devolved and reserved competencies results in disjointed policy making.

First and foremost, we need improved and accurate statistics to inform proper planning in the provision of Ministry of Justice prison and probation services alongside service provider partners. We need disaggregated statistics specifically for Wales in relation to both Wales-addressed offenders and prisons in Wales, to inform scrutiny at UK and Welsh parliamentary levels. Such scrutiny has been sadly lacking, and it has proven difficult even to get information. We need statistics on reoffending rates; on offender health outcomes; on prison staff recruitment and detainment; on the use of experienced staff from Wales across the wider prison estate, otherwise known as detached duty; and on violence rates, including deaths in custody, self-harm and violence towards staff. It has in the past proven difficult to get such information. All the information should be provided for scrutiny annually to both the Welsh Affairs Committee and the relevant National Assembly for Wales Committee, and the relevant responsible Ministers from both Parliaments should be called to account.

Currently, the prison estate in Wales caters only to male prisoners, and there is only one young offenders institution in Wales. Given the geography of Wales, at the very least two residential centres should be developed, specifically for Wales in relation to both Wales-addressed offenders and prisons in Wales, to inform scrutiny at both the Welsh Affairs Committee and the relevant National Assembly for Wales Committee, and the relevant responsible Ministers from both Parliaments should be called to account.

Recently, we were also told that HMP Berwyn would hold suitable north Wales prisoners, but evidence shows that they are still being sent to distant prisons, remote from the rehabilitation benefits of being close to home, family...
and potential employers. The best rehabilitation results are found in prisons located close to the communities from which offenders come and to which they will return on release, so the Ministry of Justice should not propose another supersized prison anywhere in Wales. It would inevitably require a high percentage of English inmates to be transported considerable distances for the sake of ease and the cost of warehousing, rather than the prioritising of effective rehabilitation.

As well as the prison estate, the probation service requires immediate attention. The proposed Wales probation model still involves significant contracting out, although the proposal to bring it back into public management is to be welcomed. It is to be hoped that that will be a future model for England, too. Only yesterday, I found that in the four years since key parts of the probation system were privatised, there have been 225 charges of murder against offenders monitored by private probation contractors in the four years since their creation. That far outnumbers the 142 murder charges against high-risk criminals managed by the Government probation service over the same period. These shocking statistics show the urgent need to bring probation back into the public sector. As we have experience of in Wales, with Nadine Marshall and the probation back into the public sector. As we have

To close, I wish just to say that the word for justice in Welsh, cyfiawnder, means to make good, to make right and to make just for all. Let us make cyfiawnder Welsh for Wales.

1.36 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): In the interests of other Members who wish to speak I will curtail the first two pages of my speech, but my thoughts are with the families of Paul Flynn and Steffan Lewis, and I wish to say how sad I am at their passing.

Since we last had this debate, I have been privileged to be elected as the deputy leader of the Welsh Labour party, so I am in the privileged position of working not only with Labour colleagues but across party lines on campaigns that are dear to my heart and that I hope make a difference not only to my local community or to Wales but right across the United Kingdom.

My work as deputy leader shines a light on the shortcomings of the Conservative Government, while our Welsh Labour Government show that there is a better way to govern, even in the teeth of continuing Tory austerity. Nowhere is that better illustrated than in the case of the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon, a project with the capacity not only to reshape the energy mix of an entire region, but to make Swansea a world leader in tidal energy while creating jobs and offering a boon to the local economy. The lagoon received the full support, including my hon. Friends the Members for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) and for Swansea West (Geraint Davies).

In short, it was a project of rare transformative capability, yet the project, steered with such care and passion for so long by the lagoon’s backers, was damaged immeasurably by the clumsy indifference and terrible short-sightedness of those on the Conservative Benches. Promises were repeatedly made and assurances offered, but ultimately all turned to dust. At the eleventh hour, the Government pulled their support for the most spurious of reasons. Why? Because, to put it bluntly, they do not seem to have any respect for Wales. Not one iota. It is this lack of respect and apparent indifference to the damage it causes that can be seen time after time, in decision after decision. Time after time, it serves only to underline the difference of the Welsh Labour Government approach.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Tory English Government’s commitment to fracking is in sharp contrast to the Welsh Government’s commitment to the tidal lagoon, in the context of climate change and the imperative there? We are leading and they are losing.

Carolyn Harris: The Welsh Labour Government do so many things so much better.

Examples of shocking disregard for Welsh communities are sadly all too many in number. Take investment in rail services. The electrification of the main line between London and Swansea had been a sworn promise for years; indeed, it formed a key plank of the Tory campaign in Wales during the 2017 general election campaign. We were told that reliability would be improved, journey times reduced and emissions cut. My constituents in Swansea East were elated to think they would finally see some improvements to a service on which so many of them relied. As we all know, Tory promises were once again broken, and in the most shameful manner: sneakedit out in a press release. My constituents learned of the cancellation of the electrification programme in the same way that I did—through the newspaper. There is no investment for Wales, no interest in Wales, and no respect for Wales. Compare that with the Welsh Labour Government’s rail investment. After years of Tory underinvestment, the Welsh Labour Government, through Transport for Wales, are delivering new trains, more services and better stations. Despite some early teething problems, we are at the start of a 15-year, £5 billion investment programme, scrapping Pacer trains, boosting capacity by 65%, offering free travel for the under-11s and providing £200 million to upgrade stations. In Wales, we are working with the trade unions, not against them, to protect the role of the guard on every train. That is the Welsh Labour way, and it is a way that this Government would do well to look at and, may I suggest, to learn from. It has meant that, in Wales, we have 30 hours free childcare and education for working parents being rolled out across the country. That is the best childcare offer for working parents anywhere in the UK.

We have repealed major sections of the pernicious Tory anti-union law to protect the Welsh public sector workforce, while scrapping the right to buy, protecting the housing stock and helping more people access affordable homes. We are now building affordable homes in Wales at a record rate, curbing zero-hour contracts and delivering 100,000 all-age apprenticeships. Children leaving care in Wales will no longer pay council tax until they reach the age of 25. That is the Welsh way. That is the Welsh Labour way, and I am proud to celebrate it here today.
Finally, let me close with something that is so very close to my heart—funding for children’s funerals in cases where families simply cannot afford to pay for them. Since I first spoke in this Chamber of the passing of my own son, Martin, and the extraordinary difficulties that we faced in paying for his funeral, the Welsh Government responded by scrapping fees for children’s funerals, following a lead set by Welsh local authorities. I appreciate that the wheels of bureaucracy turn slowly, but time is a luxury that bereaved parents cannot afford. Yesterday, the Prime Minister announced that the Children’s Funeral Fund would be in place by this summer. Although I had hoped for an earlier implementation, bearing in mind that it was first promised 11 months ago, I welcome the fact that we now have some clarity on timings. I sincerely hope that the summer, which is when the Prime Minister suggested that it would happen, arrives well before the “end of May”.

1.42 pm

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): Diolch yn fawr, Madam Ddirprwy Lefarydd.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) on bringing this debate forward today. May I also echo what others have said about our colleagues Paul Flynn and Steffan Lewis? I know that Paul was a radical, reforming and brilliant politician who fought very hard for his causes and was a great advocate for devolution.

As I prepared for this debate today, I wondered about its purpose. Is a general debate about Wales on any given subject just a token gesture to our country as we approach our national bank holiday? MPs, one by one, will stand to raise concerns or issues on anything relating to our country, but there will be no obligation for anyone to respond to or to act on anything raised.

As a devolutionist I am happy that the majority of our work is carried out by the Welsh Parliament in Cardiff Bay, with our Welsh Labour Government able to bring forward radical and progressive policies and legislation. None the less, I am constantly frustrated by those in this place who misunderstand devolution. They are supported, on the whole, by a London-centric media, which talks as though England is the whole of the UK —whether that is on education policy, the NHS, housing or social services, all of which are devolved.

There should be a place for Welsh MPs to raise issues, to scrutinise and, importantly, to get a response and some action. One of the frustrating things in this place is that, as a Welsh MP, it is very difficult to raise issues. With just 30 minutes of Welsh questions every five or six weeks, just before Prime Ministers questions, there really is not much parliamentary time available to us, particularly at this time of great constitutional and political upheaval. With Brexit approaching in just a matter of days, we know the impact that either the Prime Minister’s deal or no deal will have on our country, and we know that it will hit us in Wales the hardest. By the time that we have the Prime Minister’s endlessly postponed meaningful vote on 12 March, we will have fewer than 400 hours until the article 50 deadline, at which time we will crash out of the European Union into the unknown unless something is done.

No one can argue that that is in the country’s interest. Businesses, which have, for years, invested in Wales, are now upping and leaving, fed up with the uncertainty and chaos. We know that Ford, Airbus, Sony, Panasonic and Honda will not be the last. As more companies announce the impact that Brexit is having on their businesses, they are taking their jobs, their development and their trade elsewhere.

Stephen Crabb: I am listening with interest to the hon. Lady’s remarks. She is talking about companies upping sticks and leaving Wales. She just read out a list of companies, which included Airbus. Has she any evidence at all to suggest that Airbus is reducing any of its operations in Wales?

Anna McMorrin: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point. I am talking about the warnings that are being given. Airbus is issuing stark warnings, and some companies are upping and leaving. Many will up and leave unless something is done.

Stephen Doughty: The right hon. Gentleman does not appear to have heard the warnings from organisations and businesses across the spectrum. The other day, I was speaking with people from Cardiff University who cited Brexit as one factor in their decision to issue redundancies. That is happening in our crucial and brilliant university in our city.

Anna McMorrin: Absolutely. I thank my hon. Friend for his excellent point.

This pattern does not seem to bother our UK Government, intent as they are on delivering a Brexit whatever the cost. That cost will be great, but it will be the greatest in Wales as we are dependent on those and other such jobs. We have been at the mercy of a Brexit Government’s austerity measures for the past nine years. I see the struggle in our public services and in our communities. Our people who were left bereft following the ruthless Thatcher years are once again feeling the brunt, and Brexit is only set to make things worse. Why do we in Wales have to put up with this again?

Wales is an outward-facing international country with our own values, our own language, and our own culture and history. We do not want this right-wing Brexit ideology, which only harms our communities, our people and our services. We know that Brexit—any Brexit—only aids the right. It is a project driven by the right and for the right. As a progressive forward-looking Wales we know that the best deal for us, for our hard-working families, for our public services and for our businesses is the one that we have now as full members of the European Union.

David T. C. Davies: Does the hon. Lady not recognise that that is not the vision that Wales has? Wales voted to leave by a much greater margin than it voted for the Welsh Assembly.

Anna McMorrin: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point. Has he not seen the recent polls that say that the majority of Welsh people have changed their minds? In any case, this is not what they voted for. That is why we should put the question back to the people for final ratification and confirmation and for a final say.
The Secretary of State for Wales has done perilously little to stand up for our country. When I asked him in the Welsh Affairs Committee to name an infrastructure project in Wales that he has helped to secure during his time as Secretary of State, he could not name one. It was no to rail electrification, no to the tidal lagoon, no to Wylfa Newydd, and no to onshore and offshore renewable energy projects. What is this Secretary of State for? What is his purpose, as he certainly does not stand up for Wales?

I want to see more investment in our country, greater powers being devolved to Wales and reform of our institutions.

I fought for the Senedd back in 1997, and then again for greater powers in 2011 and 2017. I will continue to fight for more powers and for our country to be better able to govern without being hampered by this Tory Government. In fact, I would like to see Wales’s powers equal to there of Scotland at the very least. But what matters is how we use those powers. We regularly need to go cap in hand to this Tory Government in order to effect change; that cannot be right. It cannot be right that our country needs permission to build Wylfa Newydd or a tidal lagoon. We need a settlement to enable us to do that—in Wales and by the people of Wales.

It cannot be right that we are unable to tackle the serious problem of mental health in prisons, as the broken devolution settlement means that this is impossible. Justice is not devolved, while mental health is. This must be put right. Criminal justice should be devolved to enable us properly to resolve these issues and create a solution that suits us as a country. It is also certainly not right that air passenger duty is not devolved when it is devolved to both Scotland and Northern Ireland. These anomalies must be put right.

Although this place is in need of much reform, I agree that the Senedd needs one too. I welcome the Senedd and Elections (Wales) Bill brought forward earlier this month, which sets out the exciting opportunities to strengthen our Welsh Assembly, bringing about reform and democracy, lowering the voting age to 16 and introducing more Assembly Members.

Reform and change take time. In Wales, we are proud that we can grasp this change. I only wish that this place would take some lessons from that. We must look towards the sort of Parliament we want in Wales, and I hope that we wholeheartedly embrace it, creating a positive future for our children. As the historian Gwyn Alf Williams said:

“Wales is a process. Wales is an artefact which the Welsh produce. The Welsh make and remake Wales day by day, year by year, generation by generation, if they want to”.

1.51 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorran), and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) on securing today’s debate. As she is an avid Welsh rugby fan and former Wales international, I know that she will have enjoyed the match on Saturday. It was a stunning win and a great way to kick-start the St David’s Day celebrations. Eddie Jones led his England side down the M4 and got stuck in traffic along the way before coming completely unstuck against a Welsh side determined to stop his chariot. We were given little chance of winning that match but, as the Welsh always do, we rose to the challenge and triumphed in the face of adversity.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I congratulate Wales on their victory at the weekend. It was mightily impressive and a real demonstration of power. Does my hon. Friend agree that the renewables sector provides a huge opportunity for Wales to refund itself through offshore wind and onshore through hydroelectric?

Stephen Kinnock: I agree with my hon. Friend. Wales was of course the cradle of the industrial revolution and it should be the cradle of a green revolution. Unfortunately, we are dealing with the most incompetent and short-sighted Government in living memory, who refuse to go forward with the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon. I think that sends a clear signal about what really makes them tick.

Today’s St David’s Day debate is marked with sadness following the loss of our good friend and colleague Paul Flynn, the former Member for Newport West. He had a razor-sharp intellect and a rapier-like wit. He was an outstanding parliamentarian who was passionately committed to social justice and opportunity for all—a lovely man, who always had a helpful word of advice for us new kids on the block. He will be sorely missed.

Just as I had complete confidence in the 23 men in red on Saturday, I have confidence in my fellow countrymen and women to rise to the challenge of Brexit, but the challenge is truly daunting. We are two and a half years on from the referendum and fast approaching 29 March. We are also two years on from a general election when the Conservative manifesto promised to set up a new UK shared prosperity fund to replace EU funds after 2020. But with just 29 days to go until we leave the EU, we know little more about the UK shared prosperity fund than we did in June 2017.

Like much of Wales, my Aberavon constituency has benefited hugely from European money—from the Bay Campus at Jersey Marine to the sunken gardens and toddler play area on Aberavon beach; from the Crosserw community enterprise centre to the Cognition mountain bike trails in the Afan valley; and from the transport hub to the Port Talbot magistrates court. These projects would not have been possible without European funding.

Between 2014 and 2020, west Wales and the valleys were set to receive from European structural funds investment worth more than £1.6 billion, yet nearly everything about the shared prosperity fund is still to be worked out. We still do not know how much funding will be available, how it will be divided across the country, what activities will be eligible for support or who will take the decisions on how the money is spent. There is a huge fear that this will be not just a financial grab, but a power grab, and that the Westminster Government will use this opportunity to reduce funding for areas that need it most and to claw back powers that sit naturally with the devolved Administrations.

These deep-seated concerns led to the creation of the all-party parliamentary group for post-Brexit funding for nations, regions and local areas, which I am truly proud to chair. The wide-ranging review that we carried out heard from 80 organisations across the UK, including the Welsh Government, councils in Wales and the
Welsh TUC. I wrote to the Secretary of State for Wales back in November, seeking a meeting about the findings of our APPG, but have yet to receive a response. Those representations were unanimous in saying that the UK shared prosperity fund must comprise not a single penny less in real terms than the EU and UK funding streams it replaces. Westminster must not use Brexit as an opportunity to short-change the poorest parts of the UK. Equally, the UK Government must not deny devolved Administrations the appropriate control over funds. Local decisions must not be made by a bureaucrat or by a Tory Government sitting at the other end of the M4. The Government’s inaction cannot continue; they must provide guarantees on the shared prosperity fund.

Of course, one group of people who know very well about this Government’s inaction are the steelworkers in Port Talbot, Llanwern, Treforest and right across Wales. They have gone above and beyond to save our steel industry, but their actions have not been matched by the Westminster Government. When unscrupulous pension advisers took the opportunity during the pension transfer to snoop in like vultures and rip off steelworkers, the Government did nothing. Now there is a very serious risk that thousands have been conned into transferring out of the scheme, almost always against their best interests. It is imperative that steelworkers are notified of this, so that it can be remedied before the opportunity is missed, but the Government’s inability to support steelworkers does not stop there. At the height of the steel crisis, the UK Government consistently showered steelworkers with warm words, but since then they have failed to create a sector deal for steel, and last year less than half of the steel bought by the Government came from the UK, despite British steel being the best in the world; that is simply not good enough.

Disabled people in my constituency have also been badly let down. The personal independence payment is there to support individuals with the extra costs of living associated with a disability, but the system in place now is working against disabled people, instead of for them. Three quarters of people in Wales who challenged the decision of the Department for Work and Pensions to stop or reduce their PIP were successful in having the decision overturned, which just shows how fundamentally broken the system is. In Wales, one in 10 people waited more than a year to win back money that they were initially denied—a dreadful failure.

I am a proud Welshman. I was born in Tredegar in 1970. My grandfather on my father’s side was a coalminer in the Welsh valleys, while my grandmother was a district nurse—the backbone of the NHS. My grandfather on my mother’s side was a railway signalman in Anglesey, supported by a grandmother who was truly the rock of the family. Their never-say-die attitude and commitment to working hard for their communities has been passed down the generations and it is with that spirit that I will continue fighting hard for my Aberavon constituents in Westminster.

We are a proud, unique community in Aberavon. Even Banksy picked us out last year as a worthy home for one of his wonderful creations. But, like everywhere, we need a UK Government and a Welsh Secretary who will stand up for Wales; and that means, more than anything, that we desperately need a UK Labour Government. Happy St David’s Day to all!
I want to make just four points in this debate. The first point is about Brexit. Whatever we end up doing on Brexit, the Secretary of State for Wales has an absolute duty to make sure that a no-deal Brexit is ruled out. He will have before him the evidence from Airbus near my constituency, which employs 14,000 workers across the United Kingdom, thousands of them in north Wales. Katherine Bennett and Tom Enders, two senior Airbus officials, have warned about the consequences of no deal. The Secretary of State will know that Tony Walker of Toyota, which employs hundreds of people in north Wales, and in Derbyshire, has said that a no-deal Brexit will cost Toyota £10 million a day. The Secretary of State will know from talking to farmers across Wales that a no-deal Brexit will mean that we cannot take Welsh lamb to the table of Europe while no deal remains on the table in the United Kingdom. He will know that firms such as Vauxhall, and myriad firms in my constituency, small and large, are facing uncertainty because no deal remains on the table. The one thing he can do in responding to this debate is to rule out no deal, whatever we settle on with regard to Brexit.

The second issue I want to focus on is getting some assurances from the Secretary of State about the north Wales growth deal. My hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) set out very clearly what is required. We have a potential growth deal of £335 million. We have had an announcement from the Government of about £240 million, with match funding from the Welsh Government and from local sources and the private sector. We need to ensure that the Government consider what they promised they would do in Budgets four and five years ago and deliver on the north Wales growth deal. As the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) said, this is a great opportunity for investment to modernise the infrastructure of north-east Wales and north Wales as a whole, and the Government should take it.

My third point relates to council tax. My local authority has made it very clear that the difficulties it faces with teachers’ pensions, in particular, are putting it under tremendous strain. That is why this year we have had a council tax increase that is well above average. I know the pressures that my local colleagues are facing. The Secretary of State has devolved teachers’ pensions to the National Assembly for Wales and to the Welsh Government, but no money has gone with that. He needs to explain to this House today the financial settlement in relation to that, and to make sure that it is secured, not just for the past year but in future years.

My final point—my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) touched on it—is about scrutiny of the Welsh Office and scrutiny of the Conservative Government’s performance in Wales. There is now even more limited opportunity for that than there was previously. Let me take, for example, the Welsh Grand Committee. When we had a Labour Government from 1997 to 2010, the Welsh Grand Committee met 39 times to debate Welsh matters. In the nine years of this Conservative Government, it has met nine times. Six of those occasions were in the first two years of the Conservative coalition, from 2010 to 2012. There have been only three in the past three years, and there were a whole three years when the Welsh Grand Committee never met at all. The Welsh Grand Committee gives us an important opportunity to raise issues such as these. Does the Secretary of State wish to continue with it, and, if so, when will it meet in future?

It is about time that we reviewed the issue of cross-party discussions on English votes for English laws. In the Brexit debates, when I have had to discuss issues in my constituency relating to teachers, health workers and people working in businesses in England, I cannot vote on those issues for my constituents on the border who are impacted by them. That is not sustainable for the future. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North also mentioned, a 30-minute—

**Mr David Jones:** The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point about cross-border issues where Welsh MPs may wish to have input into matters that are discussed here, but does not this cut both ways? For example, as he will know, my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) has frequently raised issues relating to hospitals in south Wales. Do we not need a new settlement to accommodate these things?

**David Hanson:** I would be very happy to discuss those issues with the right hon. Gentleman when there is more time. I simply say that my constituents are served more poorly by the fact that I can no longer vote in this House on some of the issues that affect them.

With unemployment rising in my constituency by 30% in the past two years, the need for a growth deal is clearly there. If we have a no-deal Brexit, that unemployment figure will be worse. I hope that the Secretary of State can answer these points today.

2.8 pm

**Ronnie Cowan** (Inverclyde) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) for securing this debate. As I stand to speak, I am sure I can see out of the corner of my eye the figure of Paul Flynn in his usual seat casting a critical but fair ear over everything I say. Paul called for St David’s Day to be a national holiday and for the Welsh language to be recognised in this place. His work on cannabis reform has been inspirational to many people. It was my pleasure and my privilege to serve on the same Select Committee as Paul. I think of him as a friend and a mentor, and he will be sadly missed.

As a child growing up in Greenock in the ’60s and ’70s, my knowledge of Wales was limited—limited, that is, to the most important thing: rugby union, and that red shirt, those songs and, as a young scrum-half learning my trade, the greatest scrum-half in the world ever, Gareth Edwards. I hated them all. They were so good. It was hard to take. Imagine my joy when, as an unsophisticated 16-year-old, if that is easy to imagine, my school team at Greenock Academy travelled to Wales to play St Cyres college in Dinas Powys. It was my moment to avenge all those defeats at Murrayfield and Cardiff Arms Park. We got hammered, or, to be more accurate, humiliated. They took us to the pub the next day to celebrate, and it was a pretty unsophisticated celebration. I remember the songs and, most importantly, seeing the crystal trophy which was our reward for playing on that day. It had been lost another year but, over the next two years, we managed to get it back, and it was a proud moment for us all.

As a child, rugby was the most important thing, but as I have grown older, and I have been lucky enough to gain an understanding of the world, I have come to appreciate the importance of a variety of other things in my life. As I grow older and more experienced, rugby is less important to me, and understanding and appreciating the importance of the Welsh language, of the history and, most importantly, of the Celtic tradition is something that I value greatly.

In the 1860s, before my time, and indeed my parents’ time, rugby union was the preserve of Scotland and England. Wales was at the periphery of that game, and it was not until the 1880s that, led by the likes of Dan Davis, who went on to gain the freedom of the city of Newport, and a young scrum-half named Paul, Wales finally made its mark in the world of rugby union. And so, as we mark St David’s Day, it seems only appropriate to look back to that day, when Wales finally got it right.

As a child growing up in Greenock in the ‘60s and ‘70s, my knowledge of Wales was limited—limited, that is, to the most important thing: rugby union, and that red shirt, those songs and, as a young scrum-half learning my trade, the greatest scrum-half in the world ever, Gareth Edwards. I hated them all. They were so good. It was hard to take. Imagine my joy when, as an unsophisticated 16-year-old, if that is easy to imagine, my school team at Greenock Academy travelled to Wales to play St Cyres college in Dinas Powys. It was my moment to avenge all those defeats at Murrayfield and Cardiff Arms Park. We got hammered, or, to be more accurate, humiliated. They took us to the pub the night before; those Welsh boys were canny. We had to wait a year to reverse the result, but we did, and I look forward to the international rivalry being renewed at Murrayfield a week on Saturday. Unfortunately, at this juncture, I have been unable to acquire a ticket. I will leave that out there.

**Jonathan Edwards:** On the basis of Celtic solidarity, will the hon. Gentleman consider asking the Scottish coach to give the second squad a run-out a week Saturday?
Ronnie Cowan: If the Welsh put out their second team, that might help us, to put it mildly.

Often we romanticise Scotland—dashing Jacobites, the flamboyant house of Stuart and a twee caricature of what we truly are. I would hate to fall into that trap when talking about Wales. It has a vibrant linguistic, literary and musical past, present and, most importantly, future. In Scotland, we like to think of ourselves as great contributors to the world, and so are the Welsh. Those contributors include Edward George Bowen, pioneer of radar; Martha Hughes Cannon, pioneer in women and children’s medicine; John Dee, founder of the new school of English mathematics and one of the greatest polymaths of all time; Bill Frost, the Welsh carpenter who patented the aeroplane in 1894 and took to the skies in a powered flying machine the following year, eight years before the Wright brothers at Kitty Hawk; William Jones, the noted mathematician and the first to use π as a mathematical symbol; Brian Josephson, Nobel prize-winning physicist; Francis Lewis, signatory of the US declaration of independence; William Henry Preece, an electrical engineer who was a major figure in the development and introduction of wireless telegraphy; Bertrand Russell, philosopher, mathematician and Nobel prize winner; Alfred Russel Wallace, who conferred with Darwin on the evolution of species; and Shirley Bassey, Tom Jones, Richard Burton and “Ivor the Engine”—the spirit of constructive collaboration as we seek to protect our nations from the threat of Brexit. Protecting Wales beyond 2020, but uncertainty remains over the future shape of regional development and agriculture funding.

Due to receive £5 billion in EU-related funding. Some shrinking by up to 8%. Between 2014 and 2020, Wales is due to receive £5 billion in EU-related funding. Some guarantees are in place for the period after Brexit and beyond 2020, but uncertainty remains over the future shape of regional development and agriculture funding. The UK Government should ensure that all voices are heard from across the UK as they proceed with Brexit negotiations. I add a word of warning from Dylan Thomas: “do not go gentle into that good night.”

Scotland and Wales are nations with a strong tradition of agriculture and forestry, which plays a vital role in our economies. The last two years have seen the Scottish Government and Welsh Assembly work together in a spirit of constructive collaboration as we seek to protect our nations from the threat of Brexit. Protecting Wales from the impact of a Tory Brexit will be vital to the Welsh economy. Figures released on Tuesday show that a no-deal Brexit could cause the Welsh economy to shrink by up to 8%. Between 2014 and 2020, Wales is due to receive £5 billion in EU-related funding. Some guarantees are in place for the period after Brexit and beyond 2020, but uncertainty remains over the future shape of regional development and agriculture funding. The UK Government should ensure that all voices are heard from across the UK as they proceed with Brexit negotiations. I add a word of warning from Dylan Thomas: “do not go gentle into that good night.”

To close, I will say this to the people of Wales: when Scotland claims its place at the top table as an equal independent country among equal independent countries, we shall keep a seat beside us for you, and if it is your will, I hope that you will join us.

2.13 pm

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): We have had a superb debate on St David’s Day, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) for securing it. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) that we should not have to go cap in hand to the Backbench Business Committee every year; the Government should make time for this debate.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gower for her tremendous tribute to Paul Flynn and all other Members for their tributes. I first met Paul in 1980. He was an inspiration to me then and continued to be throughout my life. We will all miss him, and our condolences go to Sum and all Paul’s family and friends.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gower said she was a proud Welsh MP; I am, too. She also is a fantastic rugby player.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Used to be!

Christina Rees: No, she still is. I am quite a weak squash player. I have played for Wales more than 100 times, but one good tackle would see me off. My hon. Friend highlighted the beauty of Wales. She also said that the Secretary of State for Wales is not standing up for Wales, which has been a theme of contributions from Opposition Members.

The hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) paid a good tribute to Paul Flynn and said that he first met him when he was a sixth-former. That conjures up an image in my mind—was he a prefect?

David T. C. Davies indicated dissent.

Christina Rees: The hon. Gentleman said that he challenged Paul Flynn on some questions—no change there then, Top Cat. He listed all the good work that the Welsh Affairs Committee, which he chairs, has done for Wales through its reviews and recommendations. I was briefly on the Committee when I came into the House, and I must say that the hon. Gentleman is an excellent Chair who works cross-party. He does some cross-party training in the gym with me in the mornings, and he is quite ferocious there as well.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn has vast experience in this place. He talked about how important energy is to Wales and how it must be accompanied by infrastructure. He mentioned the unfortunate fact that Wylfa Newydd has been pulled on Ynys Môn. Yet again, the UK Government are not standing up for Wales, and they must replace the money that they promised in the north Wales growth bid.

The right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) highlighted the good cross-party work of the all-party parliamentary group on Mersey Dee north Wales, chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas). In the right hon. Gentleman’s opinion, the key to the future is digital infrastructure and 5G.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) highlighted that Wales is en route for a grand slam, and I agree with him. The boys played really well last Saturday, and long may that continue. He mentioned that Only Boys Aloud, who are wonderful singers, have been here today. He paid tribute to Steffan Lewis, who sadly lost his life recently. I did not know Steffan, but I understand from all the tributes to him that he was an exceptional young man. My hon. Friend also paid tribute to Carwyn Jones, who has stepped down as leader of Welsh Labour after nine years, leaving a strong legacy. Mark Drakeford has our support in his role as First Minister. Finally, my hon. Friend highlighted the fact that Transport for Wales has put so much investment into rail infrastructure in Wales, but the Department for Transport has not. I agree.

I never thought I would hear myself say this, but I agree with many of the things said by the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb). He highlighted the fact that we are a nation of sport.
and the power of sport to unite and inspire people. He listed Welsh sporting heroes, but he did not mention Tesni Evans, who is the greatest squash player that we have produced. She retained her Welsh and British titles this year and won a bronze medal at the Commonwealth games in 2018. She is one for the future. I must agree, however, that if the boundary review goes through, we will lose the Welsh voice in this Chamber, and I sincerely hope that that does not happen.

The hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) spoke about justice and the prison and probation services, especially for women. My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), the deputy leader of Welsh Labour, is a great campaigner, and she listed the achievements of her campaigns. We really value all that she does for Wales. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) said that she was a proud devolutionist, as I think we in the Opposition are.

I am running out of time, so I will bring my remarks to a close. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), whose seat is adjacent to my seat of Neath, is a champion for the steelworkers, as is my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith), in regard to pensions and how they have been ripped off. My right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) speaks so clearly all the time, and I really value his advice to me personally. I must end by saying that Gareth Edwards, who was mentioned, comes from Gwaun-Cae-Gurwen in the Neath constituency.

2.21 pm

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) for securing this debate, and for the support of the Backbench Business Committee in making time available for it. It has been a wide-ranging debate, as was pointed out by the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees). Unfortunately, I will not have time in the time permitted to respond to each and every point made, but if I do not have the opportunity to respond to them, I will happily continue to engage positively with colleagues in all parts of the House on the issues they have raised.

Among some disagreements, there has without doubt been unity and lots of agreement on a number of issues, but I want to underline the comments by every Member of this House about our friend and former colleague Paul Flynn, the past Member for Newport West. I had the privilege of knowing him before I was elected to this House, and I remember that he was particularly supportive of me at a difficult time. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Mr Jones) pointed out, it is a great time for Clwyd Welsh, particularly in relation to the rugby that took place at the weekend.

Listening to this wide-ranging debate, it is hard to believe that in 2010 Wales had a formula that underfunded its needs, a legislative consent order model that meant we did not have a full law-making Assembly and a rail franchise that was not fit for purpose—we did not have a single mile of electrified rail track—while unemployment was rising, economic inactivity rates were stubbornly high and manufacturing jobs had gone into quite a sharp decline.

Now, however, I would point out that Wales has a fair funding settlement—there has been enhancement on the funding settlement—and we now have a full law-making Assembly that is to become a Senedd. Major upgrades of the railways are taking place, with investment both in south Wales and in north Wales, and a will and a commitment to open new stations. Unemployment is at record low levels, and economic inactivity rates that have been stubbornly high for decades are now better than England’s. A remarkable transformation has taken place in the Welsh economy, and the manufacturing sector is growing faster than in any other part of the UK. Without doubt, one of my proudest moments has been the abolition of the Severn tolls, so people do not have to pay to come into Wales any more, which provides a great opportunity to bind together the United Kingdom.

Albert Owen: The figures for unemployment and employment levels that the Secretary of State reads out are a credit to the Welsh Government, but they are small comfort to people facing job cuts right now, and I think his tone should reflect that. On the devolving of powers, will he answer the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson)? Teachers up and down the country, like local authorities, are asking: has the money allocated through the teachers formula gone to Wales and is it going to those local authorities?

Alun Cairns: My tone is certainly not vitriolic in any way. I am seeking to contrast the situation in 2010 and the good place Wales is now in because of the joint work with the Welsh Government. I will come on to that as the second theme I am seeking to develop. I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for the constructive way in which he works in relation to the challenges and issues that his constituency faces. On the specific point he makes about teachers’ pensions and so on, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury wrote to the Welsh Government on 11 February to clarify that additional resource is being made available. How the Welsh Government distribute that is a matter for them, but I hope that answers many of the questions that have been asked.

Whether it is “Lonely Planet” highlighting north Wales as one of the best places to visit, “The Rough Guide” pointing to Wales as one of the most beautiful countries or the Eurobarometer poll pointing out that Cardiff is one of the best cities to live in across Europe, Wales is in a strong position. Wales is a beautiful location, and it has a lot to offer to the United Kingdom and to the rest of Europe and beyond. In the spirit of
my right hon. Friends the Members for Clwyd West and for Preseli Pembrokeshire, I want to celebrate what Wales has to offer. We should bear in mind that we are talking to international investors. Such people will be watching and reading this debate, and I am proud of what we have achieved and of the potential and the opportunity in front of us.

Jonathan Edwards: The Secretary of State has mentioned international investors, who will of course be watching the upcoming sequence of votes we are about to have on Brexit. He knows that the British Government’s view will be defeated on 12 March. What will he do on the 13th? Are the press rumours that he will vote for no deal on the 13th correct, because that would be disastrous for the Welsh economy?

Alun Cairns: I am disappointed by the approach the hon. Gentleman is taking. On the one hand, he, like many other Members in the House, will point to individual companies that are fearful of a no-deal Brexit, or farming unions and other organisations that have said they are fearful of or do not want to face a no-deal Brexit. On the other hand, however, such Members are not prepared to take the advice of those companies or farming unions that are urging them to support the Prime Minister’s deal. On that basis, they are being highly selective. The best way to secure a smooth exit from the European Union and to act on the instruction of the referendum is to support the Prime Minister’s deal. When that debate comes, I hope that Members will look at themselves and think long and hard about the risks they are taking with the Welsh economy and the UK economy if they vote against the Prime Minister’s deal, which offers us a smooth exit from the European Union and access to the European market, while confirming our position as an independent trading nation.

I wish to highlight my positive relationship with the Welsh Government, our negotiations on Brexit, and the legislative consent motion that we secured for the withdrawal Bill. The Welsh Government sit on the Cabinet sub-committee that considers preparations for Brexit, which is positive, and I hope that they will extend similar respect and opportunity for UK Government representatives to sit on their committees, because of the importance of leaving the EU in a conjoined way.

I point to the UK industrial strategy and the city deals. It was a privilege to launch the Cardiff capital region city deal plan this morning, and we are working closely with the Welsh Government on the Swansea city deal. North Wales has been mentioned on several occasions, and I am open to considering additional or different projects as a result of recent economic announcements about pausing work on the nuclear power station on Anglesey, rather than scrapping or suspending it as has been suggested. There is also the mid-Wales growth deal.

Finally, for a demonstration of joint working with the Welsh Government and local authorities across Wales, in a couple of weeks, together with local authority representatives, I will launch the first ever catalogue of Welsh projects at the MIPIM conference, to attract international investment because of the new opportunities that Brexit will bring.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I, too, send my condolences to the family and friends of Steffan Lewis.

I thank all Members of the House for their contributions, but more than anything I make a plea to the Secretary of State for Wales to stop putting sticking plasters on the job. It is not good enough. Children are growing up in Wales, where Brexit is a major threat to their opportunities. While the Government will not take no deal off the table, that danger remains—those are the problems we face. The Secretary of State should stand up for Wales, and get into Downing Street and sort it out. We have all had enough. I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. This is the end. Good night.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I hope not quite—that would be slightly alarming.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,
That the House has considered Welsh Affairs.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I rise to seek your advice because I saw today in the news that two British fishing boats registered in Northern Ireland, and their crew, have been seized by the Irish Government, escorted to an Irish port, and arrested without a huge amount of justification. I would have assumed that the Government would want to come to the House to make a statement, and I wished to ask whether you are aware that the Government have called for such a statement. If that is not the case, if there is the demand or desire for an urgent question, what is the earliest that one can be requested from the Speaker?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I will first reply to that point of order. It may be that my answer is helpful to the hon. Gentleman.

I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) for his point of order and for notice of it. I have received no indication that the Government intend to make a statement this afternoon. The earliest opportunity to ask the Speaker to grant an urgent question would be on Monday because the House is not sitting tomorrow. I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench will have heard the right hon. Gentleman’s deep concern about this matter, and that they will feed it back to the relevant Department for the Secretary of State to consider whether a statement would be appropriate.

Jim Shannon: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank you for your response, but I, too, am appalled by the actions of the Government of the Republic of Ireland, who have seized boats that belong to this great nation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Those fishing boats are clearly British fishing boats, and they were illegally seized in waters that are disputed—waters that belong to this great British nation. We have the voisinage agreement. The Irish Government were supposed to hand over control of those waters, and I understand that a legal document has been drawn up about that.
I understand that it is probably too late in the day for a statement from the Minister, but I have spoken to the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), and I have lodged a request for an urgent question with Mr Speaker’s Office for the purposes of questioning the Minister on Monday if he cannot attend today.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that further point of order, and the most I can say at this stage is that those on the Treasury Bench will have heard his concerns and will feed them back to the Department.

I beg to move, That this House has considered the UK’s progress toward net zero carbon emissions.

I am incredibly grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this debate, and I thank my co-sponsor, the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), as well as the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) and all those who contributed to our application for this debate. Those included MPs from every political party across the House, and I hope that will be the spirit in which we debate these issues today.

I mainly, however, want to thank young people, and particularly the 2,000 young people in Oxford who decided that this issue was so urgent that they would take time off school to protest in Bonn Square in the centre of Oxford, and try to force us into action. If it were not for that protest I would not have applied for this debate. This is an opportunity for their voices to be heard in this place, and about time too.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Lady is making an incredibly important point, and I completely support the actions of those young people. Many young people did the same across Wales, and it was disappointing to see the attitude of some Ministers who dismissed their actions—[Interruption.] I accept that that did not include the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth, but other Ministers dismissed the behaviour of those young people as being in some way irresponsible. No, it was responsible behaviour, because they care about our future.

Layla Moran: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point. As a former teacher, I am here because I want to prevent young people from having to do that again. We are coming up to exams, and it would be better if they stayed in school, but it is incumbent on us to ensure that action is taken.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I agree enthusiastically with the hon. Lady about the energy and enthusiasm that we saw from young people on that Friday? I have grandchildren in Cambridge who demonstrated, as did schools in my constituency, and their energy and enthusiasm was remarkable. That is what we need to save this fragile planet.

Layla Moran: I could not agree more. Climate change, as those young people were saying, is the biggest issue facing our planet, and in 2018 extreme weather hit every populated continent, killing, injuring and displacing millions, and causing major economic damage.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. Does it not show how dysfunctional our politics have become that this is the first debate on climate change for two years? We are dysfunctional in the face
of the biggest political challenge of our times. We are obsessed with Brexit, but we should be spending our time discussing this issue.

Layla Moran: Indeed, and September 2016 was the last time that we debated climate change in the Chamber, which is shameful.

The year 2018 was the fourth hottest year on record with average global temperatures nearly 1°C above the pre-industrial average. Yesterday in West Yorkshire there were enormous fires on Saddleworth Moor. The weather was lovely, was it not? But do we remember a year ago and the “beast from the east”? Such extreme weather events are not to be welcomed. They are not good things. They are a sign that something has gone horrifically wrong.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. Does she agree that there is no time left for delay, and that the Government need urgently to show that they are serious about tackling climate change, and enshrine in law net zero carbon emissions by 2050? That is a clear strategy that we can all get behind.

Layla Moran: The hon. Lady hits the nail on the head. Indeed, and September 2016 was the

Layla Moran: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The theme of my speech today is that we are not doing enough.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. Does she, like me, welcome the initiative of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who has got momentum behind the idea of real investment in climate infrastructure through a green new deal? Does she agree that we urgently need that kind of approach in this country?

Layla Moran: Who doesn’t like AOC? She’s fantastic. The green new deal was something we started when my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) was Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, but that has now been removed from the Cabinet. That is an example of how the Government do not take this seriously enough—there is now not a Cabinet member whose sole purpose is to talk about climate change. It is not good enough. So my first question to the Minister is: are we planning to have a net zero emissions target for the UK, and if so when? I understand that the current target is 80% by 2050, which is not good enough.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady regret that in government the Liberal Democrats oversaw the scrapping of the Department of Energy and Climate Change—

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): No, we didn’t.

Mary Creagh: I thought they did, but perhaps I am wrong. It was a machinery of government change. I am happy to be corrected if that is not the case. [ Interruption. ] It was subsumed into the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. But we also saw the end of the green new deal and of the energy efficiency standards in homes, which means we have a carbon lag that will be more difficult—[ Interruption. ]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. First, there is too much noise. Secondly, I appreciate that the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) is being generous in taking interventions, but she is being generous with the time later in the debate when many people want to speak, and those who are intervening now might not be those sitting here for the whole debate. I encourage her to make some progress.

Layla Moran: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) should have waited for the speech from my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton, because none of those things is true. Perhaps he will correct the record later.

Sir Edward Davey: I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. The intervention she just took was wrong on every count. It was the Conservatives who got rid of the Department for Energy and Climate Change,
the zero carbon homes allowance; and the green deal, the carbon capture and storage experiments—I could go on—whereas the Liberal Democrats have a proud record. Under us and our policies, carbon emissions fell dramatically.

Layla Moran: So where do we go from here? The COP24 summit in Katowice, where countries settled most elements of the rulebook for implementing the 2015 Paris agreement, did not go far enough. I have been contacted by non-governmental organisations, the Climate Coalition, Green Alliance and the UK Sustainable Investment and Finance Association, and they are all disappointed by the lack of forceful language and ambitious pledges to come of out COP24. Not enough was agreed.

I am delighted to hear, however, that we are bidding for the next round. What are we doing about it and what progress has been made? It is a good thing, but what is going on? We must make sure it happens. What can we do to lead from the front? The lack of action by Parliaments and Governments has prompted young people from across the world to strike. We all know of 16-year-old Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, whose solo protest outside the Swedish Parliament started this movement. The idea has spread rapidly. Across the world, 70,000 school children each week in 270 towns have wholeheartedly supported what we are trying to do here, but they ask us to go much further.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Layla Moran: I will take one final intervention, and then I will plough on.

Luke Graham: I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. Does she welcome the fact that, as the PricewaterhouseCoopers report states, the UK has decarbonised faster than any other G20 country and has decreased its emissions by 29% in the last decade alone? It is a British success story, but there is a lot more to do.

Layla Moran: I would point out that decline is due to Liberal Democrat policies that we forced through in government.

Here we are, and our aim must be that these students need not strike again. I must insert an element of party government. The now all but forgotten promise of the greenest government need not strike again. I must insert an element of party government.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): On fracking, will the hon. Lady give way?

Layla Moran: I am sorry, but I need to make progress. We must take inspiration from our own communities, where local political parties seem to be coming together. The Liberal Democrats on Vale of White Horse Council put forward a motion that was passed almost unanimously. Oxford Council unanimously passed a Green amendment declaring a climate emergency. The same is happening in towns and cities across the country.

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

Layla Moran: I am going to continue for a bit longer.

The Liberal Democrats want to see a carbon neutral Britain by 2050. To do that, we would bring forward a zero carbon Act, including measures to fast-track the switch from fossil fuels to clean energy and green tech. We would introduce a green transport Act, bringing forward the planned ban on new diesel and petrol cars by 2025 and 2030 respectively, and helping to fast-track the uptake of electric vehicle charging infrastructure. Then there is the zero carbon homes standard, which was recklessly scrapped by the Conservatives. I welcome the Plastic Pollution Bill, tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), which would set targets for the reduction of plastic pollution.

All in all, we need a new type of economy—one that is sustainable and which embeds the issues of the day at its heart. We must consider implementing radical financial changes, such as moving to a circular economy, as advocated by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, using a carbon tax and dividend to use market forces to reduce emissions quickly. We should implement rewards for companies that demonstrate green investment and for pension funds that take pains to divest. We should reward companies that take this issue to their hearts, but I do not yet see the radical change that is needed.

Mr Wragg: The hon. Lady need not fear my intervention; she may find it helpful to her argument. As a member of the Backbench Business Committee, I found it a pleasure to hear her application and happily grant this debate. I entirely agree with her about fracking: I will oppose any liberalisation of planning law on fracking. The Government are misguided in their policy and should listen to their own Back Benchers, who have been making that point time after time.

Layla Moran: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention; I was simply trying to make progress and was not afraid of it.

It is also clear that Brexit poses a risk to our environmental standards, as outlined in the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) to yesterday’s Brexit motion. Can the Minister confirm today whether the UK will continue to participate in the EU emissions trading system after Brexit? Those are the questions coming thick and fast into my inbox. Many are extremely worried about what will happen to environmental standards should we go through with a Tory Brexit as proposed.

I know there is great appetite across the House for change, but the message that came to us from the young people who went on strike the other day is that we now need to treat this as an emergency. We cannot wait...
another two years for the issue to be debated in this place. My solemn promise to those young people is this: the Liberal Democrats have heard you, and we promise to act. I thank all Members from all political parties and I hope that they will make the same pledge to those young people on behalf of their own parties. Only by finding a way forward together that is ambitious and listens to the fears and needs of young people will we find a way to safeguard our precious planet. After all, there is no planet B.

2.51 pm

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I applaud the hon. Members for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) for securing this debate. It is a great pleasure to debate an issue that is one of many that are more important than Brexit, although some of my constituents disagree. What we are discussing is an existential issue; in a year or two, if I am optimistic, or more, if I am pessimistic, we will have moved on from Brexit—I promise.

Mary Creagh: You say that!

Richard Benyon: I can dream.

It is absolutely imperative that we tackle this issue of carbon emissions. The Pentagon, surprisingly for some, has looked carefully at the impact of climate change and our ability to tackle it. It refers to climate change as a “risk escalator”; it increases pressure on migration and imposes the huge cost of stabilising failed states, with the impact that that can have on the security of the world. No one should underestimate the impact that climate change will have and is having on all our lives.

I find it fascinating to look at the crucial nexus between environmental degradation and security. We face a huge challenge—not just because of the recommendations of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and all that comes from those, but because of the wider context and implications of not tackling climate change.

Jim Shannon: The right hon. Gentleman and I have probably both received the National Farmers Union briefing. At the Oxford farming conference in January this year, the NFU president Minette Batters announced that British farmers were committed to greater action on climate change and the achievement of net zero carbon emissions from agriculture production by 2040. Does the right hon. Gentleman welcome that NFU announcement as I do? Does he welcome the changes that it is agreeing to for the future?

Richard Benyon: I do—and I speak as one who knows a bit about this subject. I have been trying to embrace techniques in what I have been doing through the less than perfect mechanism of the common agricultural policy and I am excited about the potential for agriculture to play its part. The NFU is right to be leading on that.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): Before my right hon. Friend moves off the security relationship, does he agree that, almost certainly, other than North Korea and the dispute over the India-Pakistan border, the single biggest risk to international security today—much too little discussed—is the question of the climate fence around Bangladesh and the possibility of rising waters forcing tens of millions of people up towards the border with Calcutta?

Richard Benyon: My right hon. Friend is right. Looking out of an aeroplane window at that delta, one can think about the implications of even a 1 metre rise. It would have a devastating, catastrophic and tragic impact on those who live there. That impact would be multiplied by an enormous magnitude because of the knock-on effect it would have on the surrounding area. It is absolutely vivid.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): On a related issue, we talk a lot about the melting of the polar icecaps, but in the Himalayas, which are often known as the “third pole”, the permafrost is thawing and the ice is melting. That could have absolutely huge implications for water sources and for the water that flows down to a significant area. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that we should be talking about that, as well as the polar regions?

Richard Benyon: We could go on a global tour of the planet’s vital environmental assets that are at serious risk of being irretrievably damaged unless we tackle this issue. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise that point.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): On a related point, it is not just the melting of the icecaps. The Tibetan plateau is the water source for 40% of the world’s population. The Chinese are developing that wild area, with serious implications for that water source and for that very important and highly populated part of the world.

Richard Benyon: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that point. These debates are invigorating, desperate though the issue is, because there is an enormous amount of expertise across the House. Members really understand and have seen for themselves the risk we face and the impact it could have.

I want to cut off, I hope for the final time in my life, the question put by some people who deny the human impact on climate change. For people who are, like me, sometimes assailed by people who read certain journalists and acquire a view, I recommend a book by Richard Black, the former BBC environment correspondent, called “Denied”. It is a forensic demolishing and devastating take-down of climate change denial. It goes through all the arguments in absolute detail. It has an outstanding foreword by a Member of this House—[ Interruption. ] Yes, it is me. [Laughter.] The content of the book is absolutely superb and I recommend it, despite the foreword. Richard Black refers to climate change deniers as contrarians rather than sceptics. I think that is right. It is good to be a sceptic and it is good to be sceptical about received wisdoms, but contrarians tend to be the golf club bore who strikes an opinion with no basis of information. The book provides the scientific evidence that really nails the subject.

The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon rightly raised the school strikes. I think it was right to welcome that event. I think some people got it wrong
and missed the point. We can all complain about children bunking off school, but that is not the point here. The strikes showed the extraordinary passion of the young people whose lives will be much more affected than those of us in middle age like me. That passion needs to be harnessed. I was moved, a couple of days ago downstairs in the Churchill room, to see the excellent “Year of Green Action” event organised by Ministers at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We heard evidence from two young people called Amy and Ella Meek, I think from Gedling, who have set up a venture called “Kids against Plastic” that has gone viral. It is that kind of action that we want to encourage among the young people who came to our offices on that day. This is not just something that policymakers and politicians will deliver. People on the ground, of all ages, can make a difference.

Thirty or so young people from Newbury turned up at my office. I was struck by their passion and their commitment, but I was also left with a strong belief that we need to inform people better about what is going on. I have already heard questions in this debate such as, “Why isn’t something happening?” when it is, and “Why aren’t we doing more?” when that is happening. We need to applaud in a cross-party, consensual way when good things are done and to push relentlessly where we think we are missing the point.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Does the right hon. Gentleman welcome my Little Litter Heroes campaign? We got primary schoolchildren involved in making sculptures out of their recycled goods and encouraged them to recycle everything where possible.

Richard Benyon: I am going to get my children on to that. I am a serial litter picker, to their dismay, and I think that is a fantastic initiative.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Richard Benyon: If my hon. Friend will allow me, I will just make a bit more progress.

When I was discussing this issue with these young people, I was conscious that none of them knew that the UK was the first developed economy to pass a Climate Change Act. Why should they? In a way, it is a rather a processy thing to know. Nevertheless, it does show that across this House there has been a determination to act. This country has reduced its emissions by over 40%—more than any other developed G7 economy. I asked how many of them knew about Blue Belt and all their hands stayed down. Blue Belt is one of the policies in recent years that I am most proud of. My right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) was fundamental in driving that through despite, I have to say, a bit of institutional opposition in certain Departments, but he did it and we are now protecting an area of sea the size of India. That will shortly grow to much larger areas and we are policing that with modern satellite technology. It is an extraordinary thing that we in Britain should be proud of, particularly those of us who were swept away by “Blue Planet II”. At least we have a Government who are doing something about this.

There has been a huge leap in renewable energy. Record amounts of power are now generated renewably. The 25-year environment plan has things in it that those young people would be really pleased to see, and they would of course be right to push us to make sure that it happens. Work has been done in this House in recent months, particularly on the Government Benches—with letters to the Prime Minister and Ministers, and meetings with the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth, who will respond to the debate—to move to net zero, which I think is clearly inevitable.

Why do we need that to happen? We need it to happen because the science is clear—it is staring us in the face. In October last year, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change said that there was an even chance of meeting a 1.5°C target for global CO₂ emissions and spoke of the absolute imperative of reaching net zero. It set forth this extraordinary challenge to policy makers all over the world: there are 12 years left to deliver that. I am really pleased that the Minister, who has responsibility for climate change, has instructed the Committee on Climate Change to do a feasibility—an impact—study on what net zero would mean and what we would be requiring our economy to do. It is no good we in this House just using terms such as “net zero” without really understanding that there will be an impact. It will affect businesses, particularly if we do this in the right way, first, businesses can transition, and secondly, there is an economic opportunity for Britain to continue to be a centre for green growth. That fits in with the clean growth strategy.

In the wider context, this is a key moment for the United Kingdom. Domestically, we have new legislation coming before the House on fisheries, farming, the environment and other related subjects. As a farmer, a conservationist, and someone who has been, and is, active in the non-governmental organisation movement—I am a trustee of a charity called Plantlife—I am excited by the opportunities offered to take control of our environmental agenda and to make sure we do what we have been talking about for a long time, but seem unable to do, which is to reverse the declines in biodiversity, to significantly reduce emissions from agriculture, to weaponise, if you like, the natural environment, to lock up carbon and to be a sustainable source of the necessities of life, such as clean water.

Mr Sheerman: I know of the right hon. Gentleman’s great reputation as a farmer. Do we not have to do something about the dairy industry and the effect on waterways, rivers and streams?

Richard Benyon: I think that the best way to protect our environment is to have more grass in rotation. If people make sweeping statements that close down certain industries—[Interruption.] I know that that was not the point that the hon. Gentleman was making, but there are swings and roundabouts. I was probably the only dairy farmer in the House of Commons until I stopped being a dairy farmer, so I know a little bit about this, and I am happy to talk to him about it.

Internationally, our leadership in tackling climate change, the protection of our oceans and reducing pollution can be a key component of what people mean when they refer to “global Britain”. As a Minister—and a devo-I pro-Europe— I sat in international forums such as the International Whaling Commission and the United Nations Conference of the Parties, and I sat for too long in EU co-ordination meetings, lowering the ambitions of the UK so that there could be a single,
agreed view across the European Union. Now we can have some of the personal changes that we can make, whether that means turning our backs on single-use plastics or considering how we can achieve, for example, a net-zero fashion industry. The report that we published last week took climate change into areas where it may not previously have gone.

Stephen Doughty: Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the personal things we can all do is look into where our pensions are invested and establish, for instance, whether they are invested in fossil fuels or renewables? I have been doing that, and I hope that we will give some thought to where our moneys are going in the context of the parliamentary pension scheme.

Mary Creagh: I totally and passionately agree. We on the Environmental Audit Committee are privileged to have global thought leaders appearing before us and giving us the best available science. It is sometimes rather chilling, however; for example, Professor Jim Skea from the IPCC told us that our assumptions about how quickly we can decarbonise are perhaps over-optimistic and based on new technologies that have not yet been invented, so perhaps the discount rate for future technologies needs to be lower than at present. There are some truly profound moments in our Committee, and I am sure my hon. Friend would be very welcome to join it; we also have a couple of spaces for Conservative Members, so I hope we can get some volunteers following today’s discussion.

We have been leaders in this, and people still look to the UK for both thought leadership and policy action leadership. We provided that under the last Labour Government with the Climate Change Act 2008. A weakness in that Act has become apparent, however: there was no review process. We set up the Committee on Climate Change, which advises the Government—all well and good—but then it is up to the Government to heed that advice or to ignore it, which is less good, and there is no review process, so now if we do need to set this zero net emissions target, we will need to re-legislate, and I will be interested to hear from the Minister about the necessary policy mechanisms.

We have signed up to the 2015 Paris agreement and to the UN sustainable development goals to create a more equitable, sustainable world. Our Government will subject
Sir Oliver Letwin: This is actually a serious interjection, unlike the previous one. I completely agree with the hon. Lady that we have neglected the soil, even though it was clearly identified in the national ecosystem services review, but does she not agree that the move to payment for ecosystem services should enable successive Governments to engage farmers in precisely that kind of activity?

Mary Creagh: Indeed it should, but there has to be a baseline measurement, and somebody has to pay for the measurement and the monitoring. The tragedy is that, if we leave the EU, this type of global thought leadership that we are now getting to will be lost and will no longer be able to be transmitted to our friends and colleagues in the EU.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an important point. In the Peak district, we have Moors for the Future, which is seeking to sequester as much as possible of the 580 million tonnes of carbon that is captured within peat. At the moment, we are seeing 3 million tonnes of carbon dioxide being released into the atmosphere each year because of the degradation of those peat moors due to climate change, industrialisation and lack of care. Will she welcome any commitment that we can get from the Government to finance those important projects?

Mary Creagh: Absolutely. I was walking on Lost Lad in my hon. Friend’s constituency at Christmas, and it is an absolutely wonderful part of the world. It is above the Derwent reservoir, and we could actually see the village of Derwent because the water levels were so low. The draining of our peat bogs has been a catastrophe, and we have to re-flood them. Globally, the top 30 cm of soil contains double the amount of carbon that is in the entire atmosphere, so it is vital that our precious peatlands—lowland and upland—should be protected for future generations. They are of global importance.

Vicky Ford: May I draw the hon. Lady’s attention to the amazing work being done on soil at Cranfield University, whose Soil and Agrifood Institute is the world leader? By investing in our universities, Britain is leading the thought on how to protect our soils not just across Europe but in many other parts of the world.

Mary Creagh: I passionately agree with the hon. Lady. I taught at Cranfield School of Management for seven years, although we never got too deep into the soil at that point because we were busy trying to start businesses. She is right to suggest that we have a long database of soil systems. A lot of people in this country like to collect things and keep them, and that is a great thing to have. We have samples that go back 100 years in some cases.

I want to talk about our carbon budget. The IPCC has calculated that a budget of 420 gigatonnes of carbon dioxide would give us a two-thirds chance of staying
within 1.5°C, and that a 580 gigatonne budget would give us a 50:50 chance of doing so. Those are not betting odds. If I were told that I had a 50:50 chance of something happening, I would not think those are great odds, so 580 gigatonnes is not a good budget to have.

This larger budget, 580 gigatonnes, is the equivalent of 10 years of global emissions at 2017 levels. To achieve that, the global production and consumption of coal must fall by 80%—again, we have done important and good things on that in our country—and the global production and consumption of oil and gas must fall by 50% by 2050. That is why I have come to the conclusion that fracking is not compatible with the 12 years we have left, and it is why I regret that it is being treated as a national infrastructure project rather than onshore wind, which has the power to give us the clean energy we need.

We know there is uncertainty, and we know there are tipping points. We do not know what will happen if we get to 1.5°C, but we know that, for example, if the permafrost thaws, releasing methane, or if the sea ice collapses, these things can accelerate.

We can tackle emissions and deliver healthier cities, healthier people and a healthier planet. The Committee’s latest inquiry on planetary health is looking at how these complex systems deliver. We have seen exponential growth of wind and solar, and we are experiencing an industrial revolution. We have done things we thought impossible 10 or 12 years ago, for which I pay tribute to the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth. He led the way in making these things happen, I would not think those are great odds.

In this country, we have done a lot on electricity, but the Committee on Climate Change has said that this progress has “masked failures in other areas.”

We have seen very small reductions in agriculture and buildings-related emissions. At a time when Persimmon is paying its chief executive £75 million, we have to ask why we are subsidising the Help to Buy scheme. Why are we not subsidising ground source or air source heat pumps, as is happening in Sweden, to make sure we get zero-carbon homes?

Kerry McCarthy: The Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee is making an excellent speech, as would be expected. She mentions that very little progress has been made in agriculture. I know this is part of the planetary health inquiry to an extent, but nearly 10 years ago, on 25 March 2009, I had a debate—I think it was the first such debate in Parliament—on the impact of the livestock sector on the environment. I was laughed at and ridiculed by most people, but I still keep banging away at it. The public are now with us, and so many people are reducing their meat consumption for environmental reasons. Does she think it is time that politicians had the courage to grasp that nettle and make improvements?

Mary Creagh: I totally agree. There is always a danger that we get called a nanny state, but if nannies are good enough for people on very large incomes—naming no names—we should provide the nannying for people with less money.

It is encouraging how, in some ways, the public have got ahead of politicians, such as with the rise of flexitarianism. We are all trying to eat less meat because of our knowledge, particularly about processed meat and the risks from nitrates. What does a net zero diet look like? What does a net zero city look like? We will have to start mapping out these big changes. Where we lead, other countries will quickly follow.

My hon. Friend is right that we need to examine the livestock sector and work out how we cut its emissions globally and at scale.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, and she makes an important point about the way in which individual behaviour needs to be complemented by Government policy. That is particularly resonant for me today, because today I have got rid of my car and have become entirely reliant on walking, cycling and public transport. I am able to do that only because Nottingham has invested significantly in public transport. Is it not really disappointing that transport is one sector that is not pulling its weight at the moment? There has been little change in the level of transport emissions since 2008. Do not the Government need to get their act together to enable more people to make greener choices?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I appreciate the importance of the hon. Lady’s point, but, sadly, her intervention is too long. And I am sure the Chairman of the Select Committee will soon be drawing her remarks to a close.

Mary Creagh: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. My hon. Friend is right to say that there has been a net increase in transport emissions over the past five years. I want to conclude by talking about what we need to do and what policies the Government need to adopt. Government is the largest purchaser of goods and services in the country. I have been banging on about the need for the NHS, which has a huge budget, to decarbonise its fleet rapidly. We have had the NHS sustainable development unit before our Committee; there is talk about doing this by 2028, but that is too late. We need electric vehicles in every town and city. There is no sense in midwives and district nurses going out and polluting the cities, and then talking to parents about treating their kids’ asthma—that is absurd. We need cross-government working on this.

We need to talk about the difficult-to-decarbonise sectors, particularly heavy industry and transport. We come back to things such as bus regulation here; mayors could have the powers to state where buses go. We have Stagecoach today saying, “The stuff in Manchester is outrageous,” but it is running profitable bus services. We need to force these companies to invest in new, cleaner vehicles. We also need to look at our energy systems. Some 31 million homes in this country run on gas. How are we going to get them to a clean gas source? Is it going to be hydrogen? Is it going to be air source heat pumps? How are we going to lag those buildings? This is not that hard, but we need to choose our policy sectors. When we choose our sectors and our actions, we can have a just transition. We can have that new green deal. We know that the mayors are willing to do this.
Finally, we need to make sure that our financial systems are looking at the risks: the physical risk from flooding; and the transitional risk from stranded assets in coal and oil and gas-fired power stations, which our pensions are currently being invested in. We also need to make sure that we have a stable policy environment. The Government can be a leader on this. The Minister has proven that she can be a leader, not least in the actions she took in heading off a no-deal Brexit in the past couple of days. We need to practise what we preach. Net zero is not the end; it is just the start of the next mountain to climb.

3.26 pm

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), the Chair of the Select Committee, of which I am proud to be a member. I am delighted that we are having this debate today, and I pay tribute to the hon. Members for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), who secured it. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) said, this is the most important issue. In an effort to leapfrog into a much cleaner, leaner and more efficient future. The technology is there.

Zac Goldsmith: I could not agree more with my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) about the importance of this issue, but of course he is referring to a global problem and has only a global solution, because we are talking about our own activities and those of the west, but about the question of how we restructure the international order, which is probably the biggest challenge facing the western world and the eastern world at present?

Let us consider the IPCC. The last annual report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that they cannot look at that reduction until 2050. That seems to me to be a little bit late in the day.

Sir Oliver Letwin: My hon. Friend is on the central issue, but of course he is referring to a global problem and has only a global solution, because we are talking about our own activities and those of the west, but about the question of how we restructure the international order, which is probably the biggest challenge facing the western world and the eastern world at present?

Zac Goldsmith: I will address exactly that point shortly. Let me conclude my remarks on the IPCC report. If one looks at the trends, one sees that currently we are not heading for that apocalyptic 2°C rise; we are heading towards something that looks more like 3°C, the consequences of which we cannot possibly estimate. In that light, the idea that children missing a few hours of geometry or physical education to ring the alarm bells and wake up our political system is somehow a wasted opportunity or the wrong thing to do just seems churlish. It seems absurd and mean-minded.

Zac Goldsmith: I could not agree more with my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) about the importance of this issue, but of course he is referring to a global problem and has only a global solution, because we are talking about our own activities and those of the west, but about the question of how we restructure the international order, which is probably the biggest challenge facing the western world and the eastern world at present?

Zac Goldsmith: I could not agree more with my right hon. Friend. My final remarks will relate partially to the point that he just made, and he is right. It would be madness for those countries that have not yet developed in the sense that we have to develop in such a way that required them to become addicted to the same system that is causing this problem. They have an opportunity to leapfrog into a much cleaner, leaner and more efficient future. The technology is there.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury pointed out earlier, there are still doubters. Of course we can quibble with the predictions, because climate systems are complex. There is not a computer model on Earth that is capable of fully taking on board the complexity of the natural world and the realities of the positive and negative feedbacks that impact on climate. Nevertheless, we are faced with a pretty simple calculation:
[Zac Goldsmith]

what happens if we ignore that overwhelming scientific consensus, listen instead to the sceptics, and are then wrong? The IPCC predictions have told us that we would be risking life on Earth as we know it. We would be risking civilisation.

What happens if instead we listen to that consensus, take action and are wrong? Well, by accident we would end up with a cleaner and eventually cheaper energy system. We would end up protecting more of the world’s forests and ecosystems. We would end up with an economic system that was more circular and less wasteful. It really is not a difficult calculation to make—and that is even more true given that almost everything we need to do to tackle climate change is something that we need to do irrespective of climate change.

The challenge is gigantic and no one doubts that—we are told that if we are to meet that 1.5°C total global emissions target, we need to reach net zero by 2050 at the latest—but we can do it. In fairness to the Government, it is worth highlighting that we are already making progress—not enough, but progress all the same. We have already heard about the world-leading Climate Change Act, on which I am not going to dwell, but since 2010 the UK has reduced emissions by 23%. We have reduced emissions faster than any other G7 nation. I am delighted to acknowledge that the Government have instructed the Committee on Climate Change to look into how we can go further and move to a net zero emissions target. It also needs to be said, though, that at the current rate of progress, we will not meet the early targets and being on course to meet the next one, we are not on course to meet the fourth and fifth carbon budgets, so we do have a long way to go.

Clearly, we will have to change much of what we do not just in terms of how we generate electricity, but in terms of how we use it, how we manage the land, and how we organise our transport, food and industry. There has long been a belief, a fear, that there must be a direct correlation between emissions and economic growth. That has been true. For much of the industrial revolution, there has been a direct link: emissions go up, growth goes up. However, it is not so clear now. Since 1990, we have cut emissions in this country by 42%, even while our economy has grown by two thirds. As we enter this gigantic economic transition, there will, of course, be losers—the polluters—but there will also be winners. Last year saw a record amount of power generated from renewable sources—more than 30% is now coming from renewables.

A much quicker transition to electric vehicles—something on which we really need to push—will mean more jobs and more investment. Supporting new, clean technologies means both jobs and investments. That transition will happen whether we like it or not. It is the old story of the whale oil. In 1850, every home in America was lit by whale oil. Nine years later, Edwin Drake struck oil, and we had the oil rush. Almost immediately, the whale oil sector simply evaporated. There is a cutting in a diary of the biggest whale oil trader at the time who said that he was astonished that he had run out of customers before he had run out of whales. That is what will happen. Old industries and old technologies will give way to new ones, and it is in our interests as a country to lead the charge.

Hon. Members have covered lots of areas on which we need to get going, but I want to focus on just one last point that has been neglected in almost all of the debates that we have had on climate change, and that is forests. Apart from transport, deforestation is the single largest source of emissions. It accounts for around 20%—a fifth—of all carbon emissions. Forests are one of the world’s largest carbon sinks, absorbing around 2.5 billion tonnes of carbon a year and storing many billions more, yet we are losing 18.7 million acres of forests every year, the equivalent of 27 football pitches every single minute. It is self-evident madness that that is happening—not just because of climate change. Forests provide us with clean air, water and soils. We do not fully understand their influence on world weather patterns, but we know that it is defining. They are home to 80% of terrestrial biodiversity. More than 1.5 billion people depend directly on forests for their livelihoods, many of whom are the world’s poorest people, so we need to protect them. That needs to be a priority.

The UK can be proud that we are the only nation in the G7, and indeed in the G20, to hit the UN’s target on overseas aid the year before last—we were the only country to do so. Only a tiny fraction of that aid—as little as 0.4%—goes towards nature, and we can do much more than that. The very existence of DFID is to tackle poverty, but the surest way to plunge people into desperate poverty is by removing the environments, the ecosystems and the free services that nature provides. Those are the things on which people depend. Of course, the world’s poorest people depend much more directly on nature than we do here in this House, but, ultimately, we all depend on the natural world.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He is right to say that this country needs to help developing countries. One of the best ways that we can do that is by using our expertise in organisations such as the Met Office. Kew Gardens in his constituency has some of the world’s greatest scientists. We should work with other countries to make sure that they can adapt and indeed mitigate climate change.

Zac Goldsmith: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I love the fact that he mentioned Kew Gardens and I thank him for doing so. I am trying to push through a private Member’s Bill, but it keeps being blocked by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope)—cue boos from people who happen to be watching this discussion. It would deliver about £40 million or £50 million extra to Kew Gardens without dipping into the public purse, and it would enable the scientists to do exactly the work that he has just mentioned, much of which focuses on developing countries, poorer countries, adapt to the reality and the risks of climate change. Those scientists do extraordinary work, and I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for allowing me to put that on the record.

In addition to being at the forefront of the new net zero revolution, which is what it is, let us also be world leaders in restoring ecosystems on a scale that finally matches the problem.

Several hon. Members rose—
It would be hard enough to decarbonise the existing size. Let us be clear that that means three times more same period the global economy is set to nearly triple in meet our ever-expanding use of resources. An instant—that somehow the Earth will expand to cannot tackle the climate crisis while our economy is tackle the climate crisis while chucking billions into new roads. We cannot tackle the climate crisis if we expand airports or build new runways. We cannot tackle the crisis if we are not good enough either.

The policies proposed by some of their parties simply many hon. Members grasp the severity of the situation, local communities. On the Opposition Benches, while Investment Bank flogged off; and fracking forced on wind effectively banned; solar power shafted; the Green climate crisis has been nowhere near ambitious enough. This calls for unprecedented boldness and vision, and a new way of thinking, to find a new way forward.

We face a climate emergency and we must address this in the UK this week, as several hon. Members have already mentioned. On Tuesday, temperatures reached 21°C in London—Britain’s hottest February day on record. The records keep being broken not just in the UK, but right across the world. In January 2019, Australia had its hottest month ever, and prolonged droughts worsened California’s destructive wildfires last year. Nine of the 10 hottest years on record have occurred since 2005.

To be clear, this is not normal. We are not in a time of normal. The implications of these seismic changes for the future of life on Earth and human civilisation are profound, yet even after all the international conferences and pledges on climate action, the Earth is still set to warm by 3°C or 4°C. In that scenario, huge swathes of the Earth would be rendered uninhabitable, while extreme weather would ravage whole countries. Time is quickly running out to limit warming, even to the still dangerous 1.5°C or 2°C aspirations of the 2015 Paris climate agreement.

We face a climate emergency and we must choose now how we respond. Above all, I believe that this calls for unprecedented boldness and vision, and a new way of thinking, to find a new way forward.

Here at home, the Government’s response to the climate crisis has been nowhere near ambitious enough. Since 2010, almost every existing sensible climate measure has been torched: zero-carbon homes scrapped; onshore wind effectively banned; solar powershafted; the Green Investment Bank flogged off; and fracking forced on local communities. On the Opposition Benches, while many hon. Members grasp the severity of the situation, the policies proposed by some of their parties simply are not good enough either.

It is not possible to tackle the climate crisis and expand airports or build new runways. We cannot tackle climate change while ploughing billions of pounds into North sea oil and gas. We cannot tackle the climate crisis while chucking billions into new roads. And we cannot tackle the climate crisis while our economy is built on the assumption that precious minerals, fresh air and clean water can magically regenerate themselves in an instant—that somehow the Earth will expand to meet our ever-expanding use of resources.

The IPCC says that we need to cut emissions to net zero by the middle of the century, but during that very same period the global economy is set to nearly triple in size. Let us be clear that that means three times more production and consumption than we already see each year. It would be hard enough to decarbonise the existing global economy in such a timespan; it is virtually impossible to do so three times over. That is why we need new thinking and it is why I am calling for a green new deal in this country—not to be mistaken with the green deal, which is a very different, failed British policy.

I am really proud to have been a co-founder of the first green new deal group here in the UK, 10 years ago. The green new deal is now getting real momentum from Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in the US. It takes its inspiration from Roosevelt’s new deal in the 1930s, which saw massive investment in jobs and infrastructure in order to pull the US out of the depression. What we need now is a similar massive investment—not in infrastructure per se, but in green technology and green infrastructure. That means a complete and rapid decarbonisation of our whole economy on a much faster scale than our current national climate framework dictates. It means a huge programme of investment in clean energy, creating hundreds of thousands of well-paid jobs. It means transforming huge areas of our country and allowing those proud communities that have been hollowed out through deindustrialisation and austerity to regenerate and thrive as they join a collective endeavour to protect the planet. To that extent, it might just be a way of bringing our country back together after all the divisions and polarisation of Brexit.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this very important debate. In Scotland, the Scottish National party and the Green party in the Scottish Parliament have been able to work together. I am not saying that everything is perfect, but does she welcome that cross-party collaboration to try to drive forward sometimes quite difficult decisions that will help to reduce carbon emissions and tackle climate change?

Caroline Lucas: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right; cross-party collaboration has to be central. The less that we depend on fossil fuels, the better, but I appreciate that that is something that we are all trying to do and it is incredibly important that we do.

This is urgent. That is why the alarm call that young people gave us in the climate strikes a week or so ago was so very important. They know that in this moment of political paralysis and morally unforgivable inaction on climate, only something really big will shift our politics in a new direction and attempt something new. I am really proud that across the country we now have over 25 local authorities that have declared a climate emergency, with our schools and universities doing the same thing.

This Parliament must also declare a climate emergency. These are extraordinary times and they call for extraordinary measures. Declaring a climate emergency would mean that it would not be another two years before we have a debate like this in the Chamber. It would perhaps mean that we have a cross-cutting Select Committee on climate breakdown and make sure that climate change is part of every inquiry that Members undertake. It would mean that every new law must be climate-proofed. It would mean redefining and reshaping the debate on climate change.

We have made some progress. I hear the Government saying what wonderful progress they have made. But if we take into account our consumption emissions—the
emissions linked to all the products that we consume because we have outsourced manufacturing—then actually our progress looks an awful lot less good. Let us be honest about the scale of the challenge that we face and deliver on the future for those young people.

3.45 pm

**Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): Last night in the other place, the inspirational Lord Rees of Ludlow, who has been the astronomer royal since the mid-1990s and is a former president of the Royal Society, gave a deeply inspirational lecture about what the world might look like after 2050. It struck me that that is actually not very far away, because by 2050 my daughter will only be the same age as I am now. By then, the world’s population will have reached at least 9 billion. He pointed out that that means that the population of Nigeria will be larger than the population of the EU, the UK and the US put together. The world will be much more crowded and much warmer.

The UK has come very far with regard to addressing climate change. I am very proud that we have cut emissions by 40%—more than any other developed country—and that we have led the world in areas like renewables, which now account for about a third of our energy supply. Because we know that this is a global challenge, we have put in that diplomatic effort. I have seen how it was often the UK pushing the rest of Europe to act, if perhaps sometimes not as fast as we would have wanted. I know how our leadership at the Paris agreement negotiations was absolutely fundamental in getting those 181 countries to sign up to take the temperature changes seriously.

**Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): We have seen that not only in Paris but at the recent COP24, where the Minister herself was a star turn. Many people reported back to me in my constituency that her performance, vision and ambition in representing the UK Government were inspirational for many other people who were present.

**Vicky Ford:** Absolutely. The Minister is a force to be reckoned with on climate change, and I thank her for her leadership not just in this country but across the world.

If we are to leave the planet a safer and better place not just for our children and grandchildren, then much more must be done. The science is very clear. We cannot continue to pump more greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, and we must achieve the net zero target by 2050, or sooner if possible. However, it is not good enough just to talk about the targets—we must also think about the actions that we need to take as a society, as individuals and as Governments.

We must also think about how we harness the powers of science and technology to help us to find these solutions. I serve on the Science and Technology Committee. We are in the middle of doing a study on the technologies that we will need in order to meet the clean growth targets. It is a fascinating study. We are in the middle of taking evidence. I do not want to prejudice the final report, but perhaps I can make some comments on some of the actions taking place. First, on energy supply, it is absolutely vital that we continue to work on more zero-carbon energy sources, investing in renewables. I know the Minister knows that I would like to see a pathway to market for onshore wind again, especially to re-power the old sites that are often in the windiest parts of our country but now have very old turbines. We could make them much more efficient. There is very exciting technology being developed. We have heard about floating wind—going out to our deeper oceans and having floating turbines. As a physicist, I will always campaign for continued investment in nuclear fusion, because the potential benefits are too enormous to be ignored. We then need the storage, batteries, air compression and smart grids to go with it.

We must do more on the energy efficiency of homes. In my constituency of Chelmsford, the district is building 1,000 new homes every year. Our new homes should be zero carbon, and we need to reignite the discussion about how we retrofit old homes to make them more efficient and decarbonise heat.

Net zero means that we need strategies to take carbon out of the atmosphere, which is why the Agriculture Bill is such an opportunity. We must incentivise tree planting in woodlands, but in a way that does not take away from our carbon sinks.

I would like to thank the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds for the paper it has produced. I am a sucker for a puffin, and I have visited puffins all over the UK. The RSPB made the excellent point that peatland in the UK is estimated to hold more carbon than the forests of Britain, France and Germany combined. We must protect our peoples.

The food that we can grow and eat will fundamentally change because of climate change. In universities and institutions such as Rothamsted Research and the John Innes research centre in Norwich, we have world leaders in food technology, and we must continue to encourage their work.

I want to wrap up by talking about plastics. I am pleased that the Government have taken action on bags, beads and bottles, launched their “producer pays” tax and are looking at better ways to recycle. However, this is a global problem. Plastic is a true disaster in developing countries, where plastic waste is blocking waterways and causing flooding and disease, and uncontrolled burning of plastic is polluting the air.

This time last year, I led 41 Conservative MPs in giving up plastic for Lent, to make us all think about our environmental footprint. Yesterday, Tearfund held an excellent drop-in where it encouraged Members across the House to do the same again but also to partner with it on the work it is doing in some of the poorest parts of the world. I encourage Members to not only give up plastic but think about other things they will do this Lent. I will be going lentil for Lent and giving up meat. Any Member who would like to take up a pledge for the environment this Lent should let me know.

3.51 pm

**Clive Lewis** (Norwich South) (Lab): I am going to be slightly partisan in what I say, and not for the sake of it, but more as a polemic. I genuinely feel that those young people called their school strikes because they think this place is sleepwalking off a cliff edge, not in terms of Brexit—although we may well be doing that—but ecologically. I am happy for Conservative Members to challenge me at any point.
I am speaking from the Back Benches, but I was appointed by the shadow Chancellor as the first ever shadow Minister for sustainable economics. The next Labour Government understand that we can no longer allow the Treasury’s short-termism and obsession with neo-classical economic orthodoxy to block the bold and radical fiscal, monetary and regulatory changes we need to deal with the climate crisis. Labour understands the scale of the challenge before us and the national and international purpose that we must set ourselves. It can be nothing less than a radical transformation of the way our economy works.

That is a problem for people who are tied to an economic system, as the Conservative party is—it is a conservative party, so it wants to keep the economic model we have. Some Labour Members understand that if we want to make these radical changes in the timeframe we are talking about, we need to radically change how the economy works and who it works for. That will be a challenge to some Conservative Members, and I will tell the House why.

We know that the wealthiest 10% are responsible for more than half of all greenhouse gas emissions on our planet and in our country, and yet we also know that the poorest 50% are responsible for just 10% of greenhouse gas emissions. This is not about a false choice between consumption for the poorest and the environment. The poor cannot cut what they are not consuming. We need to see a contraction and a convergence. The poorest in the world and in this country will need to consume more, and the wealthiest—not just individuals, but corporations—will need to do more of their fair share. That is a challenge to the economic orthodoxy that those on the Conservative Benches champion.

That is the challenge before us, and we can see what happens when we do not ensure that social justice is at the heart of the changes we make. If we look at the gilets jaunes movement in France, we see that it happened because of the technocratic centrist fixes the Macron Government were trying to make. There were €40 billion of carbon taxes, yet only a small fraction of that was invested in public transport or for the poorest, and it fell disproportionately on those least able to pay, who are corporations—will need to do more of their fair share. That is a challenge to the economic orthodoxy that those on the Conservative Benches champion.

This is why the green new deal mentioned by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) is capturing the public imagination. There does not need to be a trade-off between the environment and jobs, or between economic and social justice and the environment.

How did we respond to climate change and the sustainability issues facing us in the UK? We decided to expand Heathrow—fantastic! I think the Heathrow issue is probably one of the most decisive splits we will see in politics in the coming years. It is the biggest single source of emissions in the UK, and the expansion has now given the green light to 300 million tonnes more of carbon being poured into our atmosphere. No Government who aspire to tackle the climate crisis and to keep temperature rises below 1.5°C would ever allow Heathrow to happen.

Let us quickly run through some of the failings of this Government. They have slashed solar subsidies, blocked onshore wind and prevented a closed-loop reuse and recycling sector. They have supported fracking, privatised the Green Investment Bank and supported Heathrow expansion. They have blocked mandatory climate risk-related reporting for the finance sector, they have never issued a green bond, and they have axed their own flagship energy efficiency policy. Those young people were not just calling for incremental change. They were calling not for climate change, but for system change.

3.56 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): I add my congratulations to the hon. Members for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) on securing this vital debate.

Climate change is not a new concept. For millennia the earth has oscillated through periods of warmth and of cold, but for the first time in Earth’s history natural trends are changing. Unlike in times gone by, however, human beings have their finger on the scale: we have tipped the balance. Our impact on the environment is often hidden, out of sight and out of mind, but international scientists are clearly telling us that our actions have dire consequences—consequences that we are starting to see and feel. Heatwaves, hurricanes, wildfires and flooding are just some of the realities we now face. The positive news is that we know it is happening. We know a key driver of this change is our relentless production of greenhouse gases, so we have to take action to change that and work towards a net zero carbon economy.

I am proud that the UK is leading the way in tackling this issue, and I do think that we are leading the way. Since 1990, we have cut emissions by more than 40%, and we have done so faster than any other G7 nation, all at the same time as our economy has grown by two thirds. Our emissions will continue to fall as we generate more of our power from clean sources, and we are on track to deliver 35% of energy from renewables by 2020-21.

Stephen Kerr: Another way in which the United Kingdom can take a first mover advantage is in relation to using carbon capture and storage. If we were to make a commitment as a Government and as an economy to implement it, that is an area in which we could really make a startling difference to what we are achieving in carbon emissions in this country and in exporting such technology across the earth.

Gillian Keegan: I completely agree. That is certainly much-needed technology, and technology with which the world leader, which I hope we will be, would certainly be able to make a massive difference, as well as a huge economic difference for businesses here.

This change is often being driven from the ground up by businesses, as my hon. Friend says, and by local councils, supported by Government initiatives, and I have seen this in Chichester. Covers timber merchants in my constituency has transformed its business to incorporate sustainable business practices. It has installed solar panels across its sites, which has allowed it to save 810 tonnes of carbon dioxide from being emitted in 2017 alone. On my last visit there I saw its newest introduction of electric forklift trucks, which were operating in the yard silently loading lorries. That business and many others are doing what they can to minimise their
environmental impacts, and West Sussex County Council has been developing its renewable assets, with solar panels now on more than 30 schools, as well as on council buildings and fire stations. Today the council produces an average of 23,350 MWh of renewable energy per year, which significantly exceeds the 14,000 MWh consumed in delivering services across its core estate. Such innovative efforts are slowly but surely changing the way we operate our businesses and services in this country, together with our individual actions as consumers.

As many Members have said, this is a global issue and we need a global solution. Our role in that is becoming increasingly important, and reports of international underachievement and key players pulling out of international agreements make the need for us to remain steadfast and show continued leadership all the more important. We need international collaboration and to support developing economies to grow in a more sustainable way than we did. The Government have committed £5.8 billion of international climate finance from 2016-20 to help developing countries mitigate the effects of and adapt to climate change.

We must consider best practice adopted in other countries, and support the development of new technologies such as carbon capture and storage, which my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) referred to. As an island nation we should continue to develop and support growth in marine energy. I welcome the Government’s ambition to become a world leader in clean technology and services, and I look forward to them further developing those opportunities with our world-class universities. Sustainable growth can ultimately be more profitable in every respect.

We owe it to the next generation to make every effort to mitigate climate change. Several Members have referred to the 15,000 schoolchildren who came here to tell us that they care, and we are here today to say that we care too! Their voices are being and will be heard by every one of us.

As MPs we cannot fail to be impressed by the knowledge of the younger generation in every school we visit, as well as by their knowledge of the impact on the environment, and their passion to take action and combat climate change and create a more sustainable world for their future. I promise—I am sure we all do—that we will continue to support every effort to improve our environmental plan and support our 25-year strategy, our clean growth strategy, and the forthcoming environmental Bill, which shifts focus on to the environment and should therefore be welcomed.

On a personal level, we will all give up something for Lent—I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) has been on to us all. I gave up plastic this year, and I think this year I am picking up litter and might even try lentils as well. Tolstoy famously said:

“Everybody thinks of changing the world but no one thinks of changing themselves.”

We need to do both.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I am afraid I must reduce the time limit to four minutes.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan). Earlier this month I attended a question and answer session at Green End Primary School in Burnage in my constituency. One of the young people said, “What do you talk about in Parliament, and what do you wish you talked about?” I said, “Well, we talk about Brexit, endlessly, but I wish we talked about climate change.” That is why I welcome today’s debate and the opportunity to make a brief contribution.

As we speak, fires are raging for the second year running on Saddleworth Moor on the outskirts of my constituency. I remember the smoke drifting across my constituency last year, and I do not want to see that again this summer. The weather may have been glorious over the past few days, but this February was the hottest on record and the past five years have been the hottest five years on record. The scientific evidence is clear.

On my regular school visits, the two issues regularly brought up by young people are plastic pollution and climate change. It is heartening that they are engaged and want to make a difference, but we cannot afford to wait for those 10-year-olds to get into positions of influence before we see faster action. For relatively prosperous inhabitants of a windy, rainy island, we are not taking fast enough action.

Climate change is already having a catastrophic effect on biodiversity and the environment. Two years ago I visited Australia and went to see the barrier reef. That was my second visit because I went previously about 25 years ago. What I saw shocked me because, even though it was a long time since my first visit, I vividly remembered the colours and life on the reef; it was one of the most memorable experiences of my life. I went back to the same part of the reef on the same boat. It was bleached and looked as though the life had been drained from it. It brought it home to me that the environmental emergency is already happening. We urgently need to listen to the warnings of the scientists and the environmental experts who are trying to alert us to the danger.

With the Committee on Climate Change recommending a review of the 2050 target, the time to act more quickly is now, and a first step would be for the Government to commit to a target date for net zero emissions. As a prosperous country, we are committed under the UN climate convention to be more ambitious than developing nations, and we need to lead by example. Greater Manchester Combined Authority is a good example. We need change in all sorts of areas—energy production, transport, green infrastructure, housing—and the authority has just published a draft plan for homes and the environment. A key aim is that all new buildings and other infrastructure be net zero carbon by 2028. It is an important step towards its pledge to become a carbon neutral area by 2038, which I welcome.

We have a huge opportunity. There is an environmental and economic benefit to retrofitting older buildings, and in the longer term the growth in green technologies has to be part of any future industrial strategy. We also have to take personal responsibility with a cultural move away from cheap disposable products and a throwaway culture, whether that be single-use plastic bottles or single-wear clothing. I congratulate Emily
and Michael Eavis, the organisers of my favourite weekend of the year, the Glastonbury festival, on banning single-use plastic bottles for this year’s festival, which will take 1 million plastic bottles out of circulation. We also need a personal emphasis on using fewer resources, eating less meat and using public transport. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), I gave up my car about six months ago, but I can do that only because in Manchester we have a very good tram and bus system—by the way, the bus system needs regulating.

It is in our grasp to act quickly on behalf of those children in my constituency who are telling me that we have to act quickly. I want the Government to act more quickly so that pupils in my constituency worried about their future can see that this generation are acting on their behalf.

4.7 pm

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): I thank the hon. Members for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) for securing this debate, and I pay tribute to the West Yorkshire fire authority officers who worked so bravely to put out the moorland fires in Saddleworth and Marsden this week. They are heroes.

It took a 15-year-old Swedish girl, Greta Thunberg, to speak the words that needed to be spoken about the destruction of our planet and to prickle the world’s conscience. Now our children and young people are grasping their future, condemning the irresponsible actions of past generations and demanding a cleaner, greener, more sustainable environment, which is their right. Article 24 of the UN convention on the rights of the children states that every child has the right to the best possible health and that Governments must provide good-quality healthcare, clean water, nutritious food and a clean environment, and education on health and wellbeing so that children can stay healthy. We owe it to future generations to be doing all we can to give them a clean environment to grow up in.

In England and Wales, hundreds of thousands of children are being exposed to illegal levels of damaging air pollution from diesel vehicles at more than 2,000 schools and nurseries. The World Health Organisation estimates that around 7 million people die every year from exposure to polluted air. Air pollution alone causes many adverse health effects for children, from neurodevelopmental issues, child obesity and asthma to childhood cancers and higher infant mortality rates.

Article 12 of the convention states that every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them and to have their views considered and taken seriously. I was proud to see children protesting earlier this month, engaging in political action, to share their concerns about the future. I believe that environmental studies and climate change should be an integral part of the curriculum, but it needs to be an integral part of a society-wide rethink on the environment. Yes, positive steps have been made, but there is much more to be done. Labour’s green transformation, covering the economy and the industrial strategy, aims to address the calls from our youngest citizens. It will be driven by science—by what is necessary, instead of what can be achieved through political compromise. In addition to supporting the target to build a net zero emissions economy by 2050, Labour will ensure that 60% of the UK’s energy comes from low carbon or renewable sources within 12 years of coming to power.

I want children and adults to work together to drive forward the UK’s progress towards making net zero emissions a reality. To the children and young people worldwide who took a stand a fortnight ago, I say thank you for making your voices heard and for advocating a better future. We hear you.

4.10 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): Rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all parts of the economy: that was the call to action from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Without acting on it, we will miss our climate change targets and global warming will cause fundamental damage to our planet and the way we live our lives. So why is this the first time in two years that we are debating climate change on the Floor of the House of Commons? Why is this debate not being led by the Prime Minister herself? Why is not climate change at the heart of every major statement from this Government?

The IPCC has given us 12 years. The independent Committee on Climate Change has said that we are falling behind and not acting with enough urgency. The climate strike protestors, whom I visited in Bristol, are rightly demanding more radical and urgent action now. What has been the response? The response to the IPCC report was to write a letter to the independent Committee on Climate Change, asking for advice. We should have been amending the Climate Change Act 2008 by now to upgrade our climate change targets in line with the Paris accord. We should be setting out how on earth we are going to finance the huge investment needed in upgraded infrastructure, energy and food security and in the technologies needed to meet our negative carbon emissions in future.

Richard Benyon rose—

Darren Jones: I cannot give way because we are so short of time. That is the problem: it has taken two years for this issue to get to the Floor of the House, and we have four minutes—four minutes!—to deal with an issue of this enormity. There is no time at all to talk about how we will not be able to meet our electric vehicle targets without investment in the infrastructure system; no time at all to talk about the efficiency of energy use in our homes; and no time at all to talk about food security, agricultural reform or the need for investment in the energy network. That is completely unacceptable.

I do not think that climate strike protestors from my constituency will be particularly pleased with the idea that their Member of Parliament—and many other hon. Members here today—has only four minutes to deal with this issue. When will it come back to the Floor of the House? Will the Minister tell us in her summing up when we will have days’ worth of debates to get into the issue of climate change?

There is a total lack of vision about the long-term risks. A world that is 3°C warmer than pre-industrial levels is unimaginable yet is within the lifetime of my daughter. The United States and China—gone; Africa, southern Europe, the middle east, India, South America
will be uninhabitable, based on models from universities. Refuge for the world will be focused on Canada, the United Kingdom, northern Europe, Scandinavia and Russia. Hundreds of millions of people will be displaced as climate refugees. The world will be dominated by Canada and Russia. Agricultural and food supply chains will be completely lost. This happens within the lifetime of people born in the past year or two, yet we have four minutes to talk about it.

How we live, what we eat, how we collaborate in a global community; how on earth will we meet the cries from the independent advisers, from the community, from young people, from the scientists—from everybody in the world who says we are not doing enough to tackle this problem? We have four minutes to deal with those issues.

We are talking about the future of our planet, the world that we want to live in and the role that this country must play, and it is all up for grabs. I stand in solidarity with those young people, the next generation, who took their time away from school to strike on this very issue and say that not enough was being done, and I say that this debate is not enough, although I congratulate the hon. Members for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) on securing it. I look forward to the Minister’s confirmation later of when more time—Government time—will be allocated to this important issue.

4.13 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Time is very short, so I am going to continue.

After the second world war, we got together and we rebuilt this continent. We need to rebuild a planet free of emissions. That needs to be our single, unifying goal. We need to readdress the COP process to that point. We need to re-energise our relationship with our European Union partners—I say that in the strongest sense—to engage and to create this plan. That is where we need to be. If we do not get there we are failing not ourselves, but our grandchildren and great-grandchildren. At the end of the century, they will look back on the Governments of the early part of the century and say, “They failed us. They did not do what was needed.” They will be looking at their own extinction—the extinction of our race.

This surprisingly warm weather has been a pleasure for most of us this week, but I know I am not the only one who feels unnerved by it. We must be cautious about attributing every single extreme weather event to climate change, but the evidence of our senses, as well as the vast majority of climate scientists tell us, is overwhelming. The Met Office has already warned that changes to our weather are unprecedented. In 2018, global carbon emissions, a key driver of global warming, reached an all-time high. We are going in the wrong direction.

It is difficult to know why political leaders have taken so long to address climate change when the public want them to, and it is impossible to comprehend why some are still wasting such precious time denying it. I am pleased that Bedford Borough Council has committed to declaring a climate emergency, but the older generation is really letting young people down on this issue. They have every right to be angry about the future that we shall pass on to them. Rather than criticising them for taking time out of school to protest on the biggest issue facing our planet, it is time we listened to them and shared their sense of urgency and alarm.

Sir David Attenborough stole the show at the World Economic Forum in January. He said:

“We are destroying the natural world, and with it ourselves.”

Many of my constituents were moved and compelled to write to me after the shocking scenes in “The Blue Planet”, which showed the impact of human activity on marine life and the extent of plastic pollution in our oceans. There is a huge appetite from the public to stop this.

I am pleased that the UK has signed up to the Paris agreement goal of limiting global warming to 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels, but we are a long way off achieving it. Tougher action is needed, which is why I
support the target of net zero emissions by 2050. The Government claim to support the target but that has not been followed up with action. The scale and scope of our policies to address climate change should be defined not by political compromises and unambitious targets but by what is necessary to keep temperatures within safe levels. I agree with Sir David Attenborough: unless we sort ourselves out now, we are dooming our children and grandchildren to an appalling future.

4.20 pm

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): I am very pleased to be co-sponsoring this important debate and I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) on securing it, but why are we holding this hugely important debate only now? Like my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), I, too, would like to see this debate in Government time. Over the last year, we have had only two debates in Westminster on this hugely important issue. One was led by me and the other by my hon. Friend. That is not good enough. We would like to see more of this and more action from the Government on this place.

My Westminster Hall debate was on the UK Government’s response to the UN climate change conference in Katowice, and it was well attended by Members here today, but I was baffled by the lack of an oral statement from the Secretary of State on what was achieved at COP last year. That is even more perplexing when we think that it was the first UN climate change conference since the release of the deeply worrying IPCC report, which, as we all know, was hugely stark.

One of the iconic images from the conference was that of the teenager speaking out on behalf of her generation, pleading for more action. It is our children who will bear the brunt of our lack of action. I am really pleased that the climate strike from just a couple of weeks ago has spread to more than 14 countries worldwide. I am proud to have supported that strike in Cardiff the other week, supporting our young people in having that voice and being with my 15-year-old daughter there, and I am proud that she wanted to have that voice.

In the decade since COP 15 in Copenhagen, there has been an unwritten agreement between countries and Governments that we must pursue climate action, but only in so far as it does not jeopardise our neoliberal economic model or damage any incumbent interests. Despite its success, the Paris agreement did not fundamentally change the situation. It was non-ambitious and non-binding enough to get signed, but I am pleased that it did send a signal to the world that we have to have a very clear trajectory towards a zero-carbon economy.

As I speak, the UK is currently on course to miss its carbon reduction targets and the legally binding 15% renewable target by 2020. It has sold off the Green Investment Bank and scrapped the Department of Energy and Climate Change, and it must take much more action to meet those targets. If we crash out of the EU with no deal—I am pleased to see that the Minister has done what she can to try to prevent that—our environmental record will be even worse, with just a race to the bottom and the loss of EU environmental legislation, which covers roughly half the UK’s emissions reductions targets.

We need to get working on this, but we need to do so now. We need to see action across every single Department. Every Minister should be responsible for achieving those carbon emissions cuts. They should be taking action on climate change, and as I said in my Westminster Hall debate, we need to “think more like the Welsh”—[Official Report, 16 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 443WH]—like the Welsh Government, leading the way on climate change and leading the way for future generations.

4.24 pm

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests and particularly to my involvement with community renewable energy and solar energy.

Many colleagues have talked about the huge challenge that is climate change, and they were absolutely right to do so. We must act much more quickly. If we are to do that, however, we must ask what is the real barrier. Of course there are political barriers, whether they are represented by President Trump in America, President Bolsonaro in Brazil or Brexit, and we need to break them down. There are also some technological barriers, such as the need to improve the efficiency of storage, although that is coming along much faster. But the biggest barrier now, in my view, is finance. We must change the way in which our financial system works.

Fossil fuels have been the energy leader for 200 years, so they have seeped throughout our society and our economies. Whether we are talking about the City, our banks, our pension funds or hedge funds, fossil fuels are entwined with their investments in a very deep, profound way. In our stock markets, we have Shell and BP, which are very successful companies, but a significant part of someone’s pension may well come from the returns expected from a BP or a Shell investment. That is the challenge that we face. If we are to green our economy, we really must get serious about finance.

In my experience—both my experience as Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change and my experience of working in the renewables sector—too many of our financial institutions do not really get the fact that investments in renewable energy can be fantastic; nor do they get the fact of climate risk, which will cause investments in fossil fuels to fail. The so-called carbon bubble will burst and people who thought they would get returns from fossil fuels investment will have their fingers burnt, and that could affect the pensioners of the future.

Alex Sobel: Does the right hon. Gentleman regret signing off the Hinkley Point nuclear power station? Surely that will be a stranded asset in the future.

Sir Edward Davey: No, because Hinkley Point is a low-carbon asset—and I did not actually sign it off; I did the heads of terms agreement. It was the current Government who signed it off. We could have a discussion about nuclear, but the difference between Hinkley Point and the fossil fuels investment to which I am referring is that Hinkley Point is low carbon.

The real issue that I am trying to bring to the House’s attention is the huge number of vested interests in the fossil fuels sector that seep throughout economies
and finance. If we are to be really radical, we need to decarbonise capitalism. We need new regulations and new laws to change the incentives completely, so that any investor will need to factor in climate risk. Let me give some practical examples.

I hope to meet the Governor of the Bank of England in due course. It will be a private meeting. What I want to say to Mark Carney—whom I consider to be a hero in this area—is that I think the Bank of England should include in its reserve requirements a requirement for banks to be weighted according to how carbon-intensive their investments and portfolios are. That will encourage banks to lend to green initiatives.

I want to ensure that the pension regulators are looking at the pension portfolios and determining which are low carbon and which are high carbon, and supporting the low-carbon initiatives. I want to ensure that, through corporate governance, there is complete disclosure in a company’s accounts and its assets and liabilities of how much of that involves fossil fuels, so that investors can decide whether they really want to invest in a company that is so exposed to carbon risk. I want to ensure that if a company wants to be listed on the UK stock exchange, it must be transparent and disclose how much of its activities will be in fossil fuels.

I want a new treaty to back up the Paris treaty. I would call it a fossil fuels non-proliferation treaty. It would be a global treaty, and it would say, “We have enough fossil fuels. We do not need any more. In fact, we will not be able to use those that we have.” That is the sort of radical change that we need if we are to tackle climate change. This is not just about the policies in this country, although we have made some real progress.

Anna McMorrin: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that UK Export Finance should also consider ceasing to invest in the fossil fuel infrastructure throughout the world, on which it is largely focused?

Sir Edward Davey: I do agree. I do not think the position is quite as the hon. Lady has described it—I think that that investment has been dramatically reduced—but it still needs to be gone down further.

Anna McMorrin: We are looking at this in the Environmental Audit Committee, and that is not the case. The investment has gone up hugely, and we think the Government need to put a stop to it.

Sir Edward Davey: If the investment has gone up, I am very alarmed about that and will want to read the Committee’s report in due course.

The agenda I am putting to the House tonight is radical. It would mean that we needed a system-wide review through the Bank of England, the Prudential Regulation Authority, the Financial Conduct Authority and others to make sure we have the right incentives and regulations in our country to change this 200-year relationship between finance and fossil fuels.

The climate change agenda is also significant globally. If we get this right, we can take a major step forward in tackling human poverty, because we will bring electricity to rural Africa and rural India, and the children and families there will have the light and be able to keep their food and medicines cool, to educate themselves better and to be part of the global economy. So this is one of the biggest ways, particularly through solar energy, that we can tackle poverty. But it is even better than that: this is a way of promoting peace and reducing conflict and tensions throughout the world. Fossil fuel control is held by a small number of men in our world: Vladimir Putin, the dictator in Venezuela and so on. If we can get renewable energy, we can take the power away from those people and give it to all people—to all humanity.

4.30 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): It gives me great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) and other learned Members on this issue.

One of my constituents wrote to me about climate change recently. Monica was concerned that her “children would never know about the beautiful natural world that is ebbing away”, and she told me: “We need to act fast.”

Monica is 10 years old and I had the pleasure of meeting her at St Mary’s Primary School the other week. She showed me around each class in the school; they all asked me questions and every group asked some about global warming. Children care about this; my 12-year-old’s most frequent question to me about politics is why in this House we spend so much time on Brexit and so little on climate change, so it gives me especial pleasure to speak today, and I hope he is listening.

In High Peak we are seeing the impact of climate change on the moorland of the Peak District national park. Not only was there the largest wildfire on Saddleworth Moor after the driest June on record last year, but even in February we are seeing wildfires. It is a sign that parts of our peat moorlands are drying deep down.

Peatlands are among the best carbon sinks on the planet. In England we store 580 million tonnes of carbon dioxide in our peat, but degradation caused by industrial use, climate change and fire means that those peatlands are releasing 3 million tonnes of carbon dioxide each year.

I pay tribute to Moors for the Future and the moorland indicators of climate change initiative, which brings secondary school children up to the moorlands from our towns and cities to measure the impact of climate change on our peatlands. They are one of the best indicators.

Moors for the Future has EU funding until 2020 but after that it needs a long-term commitment to investment, and I call on the Minister to look at this and make a commitment to its vital work. Alongside beautiful moors, between Manchester and Sheffield we have seen cuts to our bus services and trains, with little opportunity for off-road cycling. People in my constituency are obliged to drive, and not just our cities but even towns in the countryside like Glossop and Tintwistle are seeing air pollution exceeding safe levels. But we have only one public electric vehicle charging point in High Peak. Electrification by 2040 is just too late.

Our bus services are still being cut, and there are cuts to commuter trains, giving my constituents little choice. But I pay tribute to all my constituents in Sustainable Hayfield, Transition Buxton, Transition Hope Valley...
and Transition New Mills who are working locally on developing sustainable transport and energy solutions, on tackling plastic, on refillable water bottle schemes, on locally grown food and on the first community-owned hydroelectric scheme in the UK in New Mills. Our communities are acting, but they see us in Parliament doing little, as colleagues have mentioned. We cannot just pay lip service. We have great recycling bins with big stickers on, but all the rubbish from Parliament goes into the same bags. We must commit to doing, as well as to just talking. We must commit to zero carbon by 2050 and to reinstating the Department of Energy and Climate Change, which will offer a much better opportunity for Conservative Members than fishing, I am sure. This will help us as a Government but it will also create a better society.

4.35 pm

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George), and I congratulate the hon. Members for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) on securing this long-overdue debate. Surely we have seen evidence of global warming this month in the record high temperatures for February, as well as in the disturbing reports of melting polar ice caps. Collapsing ice at the poles is a powerful indication of a warming world.

Tackling carbon emissions is absolutely a matter of urgency, and achieving the necessary emissions reductions for the world that we leave to our grandchildren will require the collective efforts of all peoples and decision makers on a global scale. Young people recently walked out of lessons at their schools in protest against what they see as the lack of interest in and commitment to green issues. Their action showed how aware communities are of this important topic. We as individuals must all do our bit and show leadership, and our debate on our UK carbon emissions is an important step. We must explore cross-party support and progress towards net zero carbon emissions.

The threat of climate change is more real than ever, and it absolutely must be taken seriously. The Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change has estimated that to obtain net zero carbon emissions, or carbon neutrality, global society will have to balance its carbon emissions with carbon sequestration by 2050. Failure to limit global warming to 1.5° or less could result in sea levels rising as well as the occurrence of natural disasters such as extreme weather conditions. This in turn would result in the mass displacement of people and the disappearance of entire ecosystems such as tropical coral reefs.

The UK signed up to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050 when the EU ratified the Paris agreement in 2016. Under the Climate Change Act 2008, the UK Government committed to an 80% reduction in carbon emissions by 2050. Under their 2017 clean growth strategy, they pledged to work with other countries towards achieving net zero carbon emissions in the second half of this century. The Government have also promised to use legislation to provide legal clarity that this target will be met at an appropriate point in the future. I would like some clarity on that point. Are these plans working?

The Scottish Government’s 2018 Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Bill raised their commitment on carbon emission reductions to 90% by 2050, a target that the UK Government Committee on Climate Change currently considers to be at the limit of feasibility. In March 2016, the then United Nations climate change secretary, Christiana Figueres, said that Scotland’s progress on climate change had been “exemplary to the world”. We have now established a climate change Bill that will set new statutory targets for reduction by 2050, moving into a net zero emissions target as soon as possible. Scotland has long been recognised for punching above its weight on tackling climate change. Roseanna Cunningham, the Cabinet Secretary, has stated:

“To be successful, we must create an environment in which industries can transition smoothly to a low or zero-carbon future.”

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John Mc Nally: I am very sorry, but I do not have time.

It is worth mentioning that a new stock exchange is opening next week in Scotland, and I am delighted to have been invited to the opening in Edinburgh. Bourse Scot is focusing on social and environmental companies. This new social and environmental exchange will involve rules on the activities of firms, with the staff requiring participating firms to prove what they claim about social and green outcomes. Bourse Scot hopes that the renewables industries will see it as a place to raise funds. For me, the opening of that stock exchange plainly demonstrates that there is long-term certainty and confidence in Scottish ambitions across all parties, and that Scotland is indeed a centre for excellence. I know this cannot be achieved overnight, as it is a generational challenge. We are moving in the right direction, and the quicker we move in that direction, the better.

I think the UK Government are politically and geographically broken. If we want to change the world, we must follow the girl who was mentioned earlier and get busy in our own little corner, and Scotland is doing exactly that.

4.39 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): This has been a tremendously good, positive and applied debate, and, from my 21 years in this House, I cannot say that has always been the case. I have attended virtually every climate change debate in this House, and it is shocking that we have not had one for two years.

Those previous debates were usually characterised by a claque of climate change deniers who regularly attempted to derail them. This debate is perhaps a reflection of where we have got to now. I thought that one of the last remaining serious climate change deniers in the House, the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies), would take part, but it turned out he wanted to talk about Welsh tourism, which is a mercy.

We are all together this afternoon, perhaps for the first time, when it is almost too late. Everything that has been said by climate scientists, and that has been said in all the debates I have been involved in during my long time in the House, is coming true and proving to be right. We should perhaps talk not about a climate change debate but about a climate is changing debate.

I am not smug about the fact that what I was saying in our previous debates has been proved right, and what those climate change deniers were saying has been proved
wrong; it scares me stiff. We are now at two minutes to 12 on the climate emergency before us. I thank all the hon. Members who, in different ways, have contributed this afternoon on that central point.

I thank the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) for securing this debate, and I thank the hon. Members, such as my hon. Friends the Members for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) and for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin), who pointed out just how little time we have had for these debates. When we get the advice of the Committee on Climate Change on a net zero future, it might be appropriate for the Minister to make sure that we can have a debate in Government time, for at least half a day—or a whole day, if we want to be ambitious—on that advice and its implications and ramifications so that hon. Members are allowed the proper time to put across what they want to say about this climate emergency and what we need to do to deal with it.

I am scared stiff because I know that the ability to do anything about this climate emergency is on our watch. Members of Parliament over the next 12 years, as mentioned in the IPCC report, will have to get their act together on climate change or forever miss the opportunity to do anything about it.

Mr Sweeney: My hon. Friend is making an important point about the time constraints, and about how this House has not done nearly enough to debate this issue. Does he agree it is critical that other Government Departments, not just BEIS, focus on the implications of climate change, particularly the Department for Transport, the Department of Health and Social Care and the Ministry of Defence and so on? We must understand the impact those Departments have on Government policy in shaping a holistic approach to policy making across all parts of Government.

Dr Whitehead: My hon. Friend makes an important point, which is that the action we need to be taking in this House for the future must not just be the province of one Department, as the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) pointed out. It needs to be something that seeps to the core of every part of government and of this House. Everything we do must be judged by whether we are making progress on reducing carbon emissions and fighting the effects of climate change or whether it is going in the opposite direction.

In that context, I want to draw the House’s attention to what we have done so far and what we are—we hope—going to do for the future, because that is crucial in terms of moving from our current target of an 80% reduction in greenhouse gases by 2050 to that net zero target. Of course a net zero target does not just mean doing things that reduce carbon; it means doing things that actually put carbon back in the ground. We are talking about negative carbon emissions, as well as positive carbon emissions. It means planning a whole different system of doing things, as my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) and for Cardiff North drew attention to. We need to do things in different ways in order to make that change in our economy, so that we have a permanent low-carbon, sustainable economy for the future.
opinion poll has found that 72% of the public are either very concerned or fairly concerned about climate change, if we spent more time talking about it here, that would be welcomed by them as well as by us.

Claire Perry: I entirely agree. Many groups out there will be waiting to see what we say today, including those young people who took to the streets with great energy and verve. It was an absolutely amazing thing to see. I note that in applying for this debate the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon said she was “very supportive of them but as a teacher” a little concerned “because it would really have annoyed me in my physics classes”. I am afraid she probably would have been cross with me had she been my teacher, because I fear I would have been out there with them at their age—although, of course, I was studying geography and meteorology, not physics.

I wish to address a few points: first, where we are; secondly, why we need to do more; and thirdly, why this is so incredibly important. By the way, I welcome the really collegiate cross-party tone of the debate. There were some political digs, but I am not going to get into political point scoring, because unless we pull together on this, we will not make progress. This has to be a cross-Government, cross-party, global initiative, and we need a lot more consensus than we have had.

Following the previous debate, let me say happy St David’s Day for tomorrow to the very many Welsh Members. As Members representing all four nations in this great group, we can take pride in the UK’s record on tackling climate change. We were among the first to recognise the problem. Indeed, Mrs Thatcher spoke on this in the House of Commons. It is worth noting, as others have, that we are on target to drop our carbon emissions by 57% by 2032. Of course, we need to get to 80% by 2050. Some will say that we have not yet set out exactly how we are going to reach those targets. We published the clean growth strategy—the most comprehensive document I have ever seen from a Government—setting out policies and proposals to decarbonise right across our economy. I am happy to say that we have delivered almost all the action points and commitments that we have made so far. We know that we have to do more and we will do more. We have to go further than those budgets, which is the point of the debate.

Sir Oliver Letwin: My right hon. Friend and I have often discussed this question, but I hope she will acknowledge that the provision of the basic charging infrastructure on the trunk road network now proposed by Next Green Car would be a huge step forward. If we can cure range anxiety for electric vehicles, we might see a tipping point, which would have a big effect, even on the things mentioned by the former Energy Secretary, the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey).

Claire Perry: My right hon. Friend makes the point well about some of the things that the Government can actually do. So much of this is about a combination of the public and the private sector working together, but there are absolutely parts of the equation on which the Government can and must lead, such as through legislation and incentives. I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab) rose—

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP) rose—

Claire Perry: I will of course try to take as many interventions as I can, but I just want to respond to some of the points made in the debate.

After the very startling and worrying IPCC report, we were the first developed country to ask for advice on how we would achieve that target. We have asked how, by when and how much it is going to cost. We have to be pragmatic about this: we have to recognise the need for urgency, but we cannot bring forward policies and proposals that do not command the support of the people we represent. We can see just across the channel what happens when we do that.

Sir Edward Davey: While the Minister is talking about the targets and the request for the CCC to comment on net zero, will she say whether it will be possible for the CCC to recommend a new net zero target for 2050, following her letter?

Claire Perry: The current advice is that it is not technically possible, so I have asked the CCC to set out clearly when it thinks we should be able to achieve it. I look forward to sharing that information with the House and think a debate would be appropriate.

This is about not just actions, policies and words, but delivery. As others have noted, PricewaterhouseCoopers has said that the UK is at the top of the G20 leader board in this space. Since 1990, we have cut emissions by more than any other developed country—as a proportion of our economic growth. That is important because the best way to cut emissions is to have recessions, which is not a good thing for the prosperity and the future of our constituents. It is extremely important therefore that we recognise and celebrate that progress, but that we commit ourselves to do more.

Caroline Lucas: My question really is what would our position look like on that league table if we were to take into account consumption emissions. My general point is that, although the Minister says that we cannot go faster than the country as a whole wants us to do, there is also a role for Government to show real leadership. The way to do that is to make sure that social justice is at the heart of the approach to climate. That way, we will not have the problem of the gilets jaunes.

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady makes an important point. Of course the role of Government is to set ambition and to lead. I wish to pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and
Claire Perry (Mr Hurd), who was in his place earlier. He, along with many other Members in this place from all parties, has contributed so much time and ingenuity over the past few years to come up with these policies. I accept the hon. Lady’s point about the calculation, but that is the basis on which that chart is calculated. The consumption emissions of all countries are not necessarily allocated. The point is that, on that basis, we have led the world, and that is something on which we should absolutely focus.

I will talk about some of the other things that we have delivered—things, I hope, that the hon. Lady will feel pleased about for once. Last year was a record year for the generation of power from renewables. We were at 32%. [Interruption.] The hon. Lady is heckling like one of the gilets jaunes. I wish that she would listen and behave like the elder stateswoman that she could be. We have had the world’s first floating offshore wind platform in operation. We have set out an auction structure for offshore wind. [Interruption.] Offshore wind is rather important in decarbonising our energy. We also had the first set of coal-free days in our energy generation since the industrial revolution, which has allowed us to take global leadership in the Powering Past Coal Alliance to encourage 80 other countries, states, cities and companies to operate in a coal-free way.

Thangam Debbonaire rose—

Claire Perry: I will give way briefly to the hon. Lady.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Minister very much for giving way. I know that she is very short of time. Although I welcome all of those achievements, does she not agree that, if we really are to meet the highest possible necessary carbon neutral targets, we need to invest more and more in renewables and less and less in fossil fuels?

Claire Perry: I entirely agree with the hon. Lady. That is why I am about to bring forward the offshore wind sector deal that sets out how we will continue to drive that capacity. It is why we are spending almost £6 billion over the course of this Parliament—

Anna McMorrin: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Claire Perry: I would just love to make some progress, because I have only three minutes left. I wish to leave some time for the hon. Lady who called this debate.

Madam Deputy Speaker: No, the Minister has one minute left.

Claire Perry: In that case, having given way very generously, I will say this: I entirely accept the challenge of working further and faster. We must keep leading from the front so that we can avoid the climate catastrophe that others have been so eloquent about. We must find the new opportunities that this transition presents. We must repair our ecosystems so that we can look the next generation in the eye and say that we did what we had to do to protect our planet for their future. We protected planet A because there is no planet B.

4.58 pm

Layla Moran: I simply wish to say thank you so much to all those who have contributed to this incredibly important debate. I am pleased to hear from the Minister that, next time, Government time might be available to debate these things. I had a number of emails from other Members in this House who were desperate to be here, but who could not make it for other reasons. The fact that this is a Thursday afternoon and we have managed to more than fill the time suggests that this is a subject that everyone across this House finds incredibly important.

I will end by saying to those young people who got together and made us act: may this not be the last time that we do this, but the first of very many times that we come together to try to solve this problem for them.

Claire Perry: Oh!

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Minister is right to note that there are a few seconds left, which has surprised me given that this has been such a well-subscribed and well-ordered debate this afternoon. There, I have taken up the few seconds that were remaining. Thus, we are at the point where I can put the question.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the UK’s progress toward net zero carbon emissions.
Yemen

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Iain Stewart.)

5 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I am most grateful to Mr Speaker for granting this debate. I am glad to see the Minister for the Middle East, the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), present today, for he is a person of great knowledge and experience regarding this matter. I am also glad to see other colleagues in attendance.

In a world beset by multiple crises, Yemen continues to exhaust all comparisons as a political and humanitarian crisis. There has never been a conflict quite like it. In 267 days’ time, we will be approaching the fourth anniversary of this gruesome and tragic war, when the first bombs fell near the city of my birth, Aden. By the minute, by the hour and by the day, Yemenis continue to die. Whether by air raids, landmines, starvation or illness, Yemenis from the north and the south are suffering unimaginable trauma, and are being killed.

Yemen holds that bleak title of the world’s worst humanitarian disaster. The scorecard of shame brings tears to my eyes. Eighty-five thousand children have starved to death, 24 million people need humanitarian assistance, 3.1 million have been displaced and 60,000 have been killed since conflict began in March 2015. That is 294 each week, and 42 every single day.

Yemen is still suffering because, despite recent discussions and negotiations, in Yemen itself nothing has changed. When I meet and speak to Yemenis, they are crying out for peace. But they are asking searching questions of this Parliament and our Government: “Why is this still going on? How much more suffering can we take? And why is the world appearing to do nothing about it?”

This humanitarian situation is a tragedy. For six months, until only last week, there was absolutely no access to the Red Sea mills in the port of Hodeidah, which can feed up to 3.7 million people in a month. A UN report published just 14 days ago on 14 February reported that 14.3 million Yemenis are now in acute need. BBC News on 4 February revealed harrowing images of children starving; 10.3 million children do not know where their next meal will come from. Yet the war continues. Bombing runs—155 in January this year—are terrorising people, and destroying buildings and 1,000 years of Yemeni heritage.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for doing so much to highlight this cause; he is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that the bombing of medical facilities—five medical facilities run by Médecins sans Frontières have been bombed since 2015—is a criminal act, and that medical facilities should never be a target in such a conflict?

Keith Vaz: I absolutely agree and I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for all the work that she has done on Yemen, keeping this issue very much alive in this Parliament and elsewhere. She is right that there is no excuse for bombing medical facilities.

In fact, 19,200 airstrikes have hit since those first raids in 2015. Violence is being perpetrated on all sides. A total of 267 civilians have died because of landmines that are now hidden in the landscape of western Yemen. In January 2019, five charity workers were killed while trying to de-mine. There is no point in the UK Government generously pledging funds if the aid cannot actually reach the people of Yemen.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) for yet again bringing this subject to this House and for his tenacious pursuit of justice for the country of his birth. In addition to the extraordinary litany of human tragedy, just some of which he has reeled off, and the fact that, incredibly, it seems that no fewer than 80% of Yemeni people are in need of some form of humanitarian assistance, does he agree that there has also been a particularly worrying increase in gender-based violence in a country not best known for its women’s rights? Aid agencies estimate that there has been a 63% increase in gender-based violence, including rape and sexual assault, during this conflict—just to add to the woes of the bombs, the famine, the disease and the warfare that is going on as well.

Keith Vaz: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I pay tribute to him for his work in the all-party parliamentary group on Yemen. The last time I was in Sana’a, it was with him; he took some beautiful pictures of the wonderful heritage there. He is right: these figures on assaults are even more worrying. In the middle of all this war, there are still these assaults going on. They need to be addressed and they need to be contained.

Following the failure of the Geneva talks, the sides convened in Stockholm in December 2018. Two bodies were established, one to oversee the exchange of prisoners—the Redeployment Co-ordination Committee—and the other to monitor the agreement: the UN Mission to Monitor the Hodeidah Agreement. Critical was the establishment of a ceasefire in the governorate of Hodeidah; that would free a vital port and allow much-needed humanitarian aid into the country. But the peace talks appear to have stalled. The original deadline for troop withdrawals was 1 January 2019, yet agreement as to how to implement the first phase was made only on 17 February. Despite Stockholm, the most up-to-date figures suggest that 568 incidents of violence occurred in Hodeidah alone, along with six coalition airstrikes. I ask the Minister: on what date will the peace talks reconvene, and why do bombs continue to fall on Yemen during the peace process?

I thank the Foreign Secretary and the Minister for their efforts to support the peace process. The Foreign Secretary himself travelled to Stockholm—an indication of where his and the Government’s priorities lie. I am also grateful to the Foreign Secretary for, earlier this month, meeting me and other members of the APPG: the hon. Members for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), who are in their places; the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman); my hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) and for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg); and the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt).

A meeting of the Yemen Quad of the United States, the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates took place in Warsaw on 13 February. When is the next meeting of the Quad going to take place?
[Keith Vaz]

There have been only five meetings since 2015. They must meet every month until we have peace. These high-level meetings must be followed with action on the ground. We need to ensure that the Yemen Government and Houthis implement the agreements made in Warsaw and in Stockholm.

I understand that the Foreign Secretary is visiting Saudi Arabia, Oman and the United Arab Emirates over the next few days. I welcome his efforts to keep pressure on and maintain dialogue with those key countries in the region. I urge him to go to Yemen during that time. What better message could we send our allies and the Yemeni people than to have the British Foreign Secretary himself present in the country and, subject to security considerations, opening a diplomatic presence in Sana’a and Hodeidah? The work of the Yemeni ambassador to the United Kingdom, His Excellency Dr Yassin Saeed Noman, has been important in maintaining our dialogue with the Government in Yemen and President Hadi, who is in Riyadh. I hope that those strong links will continue.

The United Kingdom has long been one of the greatest financial backers of Yemen’s relief effort. That includes £175 million in 2018-19 and £2.5 million for the functioning of the United Nations civilian coordinator’s office, including to assist in de-mining efforts. The £200 million funding announced by the Prime Minister on Sunday 24 February in Sharm el-Sheikh with the Minister for the Middle East, who was in Egypt with her, brings the total amount that the United Kingdom has pledged to £770 million.

But pledges of financial support alone will not feed the victims of this conflict, nor provide the medical help they need, unless the money is spent. We are horrified to hear reports of executions. The Lords International Relations Committee has published a devastating report suggesting that UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia may have been used in Yemen. If that is true, it is a negation of our international obligations.

I commend again the work of the United Nations, the Security Council and special envoy Martin Griffiths for bringing forward resolution 2451 on 21 December 2018 and resolution 2452 on 16 January 2019. Earlier this week, the UN raised $2.6 billion in Geneva at its annual high-level pledging conference, but to the people of Yemen—those who are starving and dying—that is Monopoly money. Around $6 billion has been raised over the past decade, since Prime Minister Gordon Brown’s first pledging conference, but where has the money gone? Where has it been spent, and where is it being held? Since this week’s pledging event, 126 people have died in Yemen.

I am glad that the pledging conference has brought attention to this crisis. Daily, we see individuals and celebrities appealing for financial support on behalf of the Yemeni people. I want particularly to thank Eddie Izzard—who, like me, was born in Yemen—as well as Michael Sheen and our recent Oscar winner Olivia Colman, who have made appeals for Yemen over the last few weeks and who speak in their campaigns for the silent of Yemen.

At last, parliamentarians in other countries seem to be paying attention to Yemen. The US Congress passed House joint resolution 37 on 14 February, calling for an end to American involvement in the Yemen conflict. Congressman Ro Khanna from California, in particular, and Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont have been instrumental in maintaining pressure in the United States. It would be good if President Trump could follow their lead and personally participate in these peace discussions.

In Paris in November 2018, at the first inter-parliamentary conference on Yemen, along with Sébastien Nadot, the Assemblée Nationale Member for Haute-Garonne, the APPG and the Assemblée Nationale brought together MPs and activists from across Europe. Following our conference in Paris, a petition was put forward calling for an end to the war in Yemen, which has been signed by 7,600 people.

The next inter-parliamentary conference on Yemen will take place in May in Edinburgh, hosted by the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife and the hon. Member for Glasgow Central, who is the secretary of the all-party group. I extend an invitation to the Minister of State to attend that meeting in Edinburgh and join parliamentarians from Europe and all over the world.

Today, we will send a letter, co-signed by the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), to the Foreign Secretary, urging him to keep Yemen as his top priority and to maintain pressure on our allies for immediate peace. I hope others will sign it. The all-party group is having a meeting next week on the rule of law in Yemen, and on 19 March, just a week before the bloody war’s anniversary, a meeting on the humanitarian situation.

This is what we want the Minister to commit to tonight: we need an immediate ceasefire—the bloodshed has gone on for too long—and we need a date for the next peace talks. Stockholm was a breakthrough, but it was only the beginning, and it needs to be implemented. When will the next round of talks take place? They need to happen now.

I commend the aid agencies, such as Oxfam, the International Rescue Committee, Médecins sans Frontières, CARE International, the Norwegian Refugee Council and Save the Children, which have provided food and medicines. They have food and medicines waiting at the border, but they cannot access the country while there is fighting around the vital entry points. They are coming to Parliament in 10 days’ time. Without them, so many more Yemenis would have died. The United Kingdom Government must work unceasingly with international partners to allow immediate and comprehensive access for the aid agencies to ensure that humanitarian support can reach those most in need. This Parliament, this Government, our country must lead the world movement for peace in Yemen. There is no point holding the pen for Yemen if we do not use it.

I want to end by quoting Amani, a young Yemeni woman currently living in Yemen who wrote this poem:

“Three years have passed and an English newsreader told me home was only a lost young man holding his Ak47, with no shoes. But the shackled arms, malnourished hips stare into the distance and arcs...”
of bones screech waiting for food parcels to arrive and slouching shoulders sitting with an empty stomach it grows, hoping war could speak, it would chop it’s tongue, loose it’s limbs and hide under the rubble shattered in regret.

Three have passed and counting
You watch your home collapse to its ground, the same ground your fathers fed this soil with their blistered hands. The same ground that raised you, fed you and taught you to stand up straight.

Three years have passed and counting
You ask yourself, ‘Do they know who suffers the most?’
The people in-between.
The ordinary lives.
The survivors.
The forgotten people,
The forgotten Yemen.”

I beg the Minister to spend every working moment in the Foreign Office keeping Yemen at the top of his agenda. I yearn to return to the country of my birth, to the happy times I spent with my parents and sisters, and to take my son and daughter and wife with me. To do this, we need to stop the bombing, save the children and prevent this beautiful country from bleeding to death. It is in our hands.

5.18 pm

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): I thank the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) for securing this debate. I am very grateful to him and to all the members of the all-party group on Yemen for their ongoing work and commitment to ending this devastating conflict.

The right hon. Gentleman accurately and emotionally describes the horror of the background to this war. While he is here, while the all-party group is here and while Foreign Office Ministers are here, Yemen will not be a forgotten conflict. I do not think anyone can articulate it any better than the right hon. Gentleman, who speaks both from practical political knowledge and a relationship with Yemen that few others in this House have. It is beyond desperation to recognise that the complexities of this conflict, with all the agonies of the people whom the right hon. Gentleman described, do not allow for external actions and concerns to be, on their own, definitive in bringing this conflict to an end. Would that it were up to us to end it, and that we could.

Let me demonstrate what we are trying to do and update colleagues on developments in the political and humanitarian situation and on all UK Government actions to support the UN-led peace process, help the Yemeni people and bring about lasting peace. As the conflict approaches its fifth year, millions of Yemenis are being subjected to appalling suffering. Today, more than 24 million Yemenis—a staggering 80% of the population—are in need of humanitarian assistance. The threat of famine remains, with almost 10 million people at risk of starvation, and that dire situation must be brought to an end.

The Government are clear that the only way to end the suffering of the Yemeni people is for the parties to the conflict to agree a political settlement. That has been difficult because of the lack of trust between them and the complexities of the conflict, about which the House has spoken a number of times. The UN-led talks in Stockholm were a great achievement, and they brought the parties to the conflict together for the first time in more than two years. However, time is running out for the people of Yemen, and that progress must now be mirrored on the ground. It is crucial that the parties implement the agreements to move us closer to the end of this crisis.

We have seen some progress. Since 18 December, the fragile ceasefire in Hodeidah has continued to hold, and there has been a general de-escalation by both sides around the city. Although imperfect, that ceasefire in Yemen is the longest since the conflict began in 2015. A nationwide ceasefire would have an effect on the ground only if it is underpinned by a political deal between the conflict parties, as we saw in Hodeidah. During the last meeting of the Redeployment Co-ordination Committee, the parties also agreed to an initial redeployment of troops away from the ports of Hodeidah, Ras Isa and As-Salif and from critical humanitarian sites around the city of Hodeidah.

Although there have been delays, the UN was able to access the Red Sea mills on Tuesday for the first time in more than six months. Those mills contain enough grain to feed more than 3 million people for a month, although some of it may be spoiled and the UN is assessing the damage. Why was that not done before? It was not done because the Houthis mined the area substantially and regularly, to prevent humanitarian workers from getting there. Some of the stuff has probably also been stolen, but that will be discovered only once the UN gets to those mills. We should be in no doubt about how some of the parties to this conflict have behaved, and the Houthis and Houthi-controlled areas have been the worst for that.

I commend the work of UN agencies—particularly the World Food Programme and its director, David Beasley, whom I met a couple of weeks ago in London—for the work they do, and the risk that all humanitarian workers in Yemen take in doing that work.

Tim Loughton: The right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) mentioned a financial commitment of more than £700 million by the British taxpayer, which is phenomenal and generous. How much of that money has been spent, and how much has not been, simply because of some of the obstacles to aid going in that the Minister has described? What more can we do to speed up that aid getting to places where it is most needed?

Alistair Burt: I cannot give a precise figure, and the current UN pledging conference held in Geneva this week—the right hon. Gentleman referred to that—was seeking a further $4 billion. A lot of money has been spent, but the figure is imprecise—I will provide an exact figure in due course. We give funding to the agencies,
but they cannot always get through and sometimes the grain is not available. Money has to be pooled to be used, but practical difficulties on the ground mean that straightforward easy accountability, and providing a profit and loss account on a regular basis, is more difficult. It is important to ensure that resources are there. The tragedy is that although, as Mr Beasley tells me, food resources have been there, we must keep up the interest in Yemen to ensure that resources exist to provide for more, and the difficulty is in getting it into Yemen.

I will put my brief to one side because I do not have time, but let me get to the practicalities of this issue. The right hon. Gentleman asked about process and when the next conference will take place. Martin Griffiths, the special envoy, has described a process of trying to encourage confidence between the parties, because confidence is extremely low.

I will be blunt about something else. There are people who want to keep the war going. Everyone in this place and in our country assumes that people want to end the conflict. Would it were so. People make money out of conflict. Would it were so. People make money out of conflict. We raise all the issues that he did for more, and the difficulty is in getting it into Yemen.

That is what Martin Griffiths is patiently working at. There is no easy timetable. It is not possible to say, “In three weeks, you must meet again and decide” so and so, because they will not. We have to work on a process to get people together and know that, when they do meet, they are prepared to make an agreement and stick to it, and that takes time. It takes much too long, but if it was a process in which we demanded people do things, we would not be where we are today.

Keith Vaz: What is the key blockage? I know that it is very complicated and there are lots of different factors, but is there one key issue? It was prisoner swaps before. Is there something else holding this up?

Alistair Burt: I do not think so. Actually, the parties are still discussing prisoners, but the fact that they are talking—through the UN envoy—is an advance on where we were. It is difficult, even impossible, to urge patience on the people about whom the right hon. Gentleman spoke so eloquently, but this will be brought to an end only by that gradual development of confidence between the parties—confidence that is so delicate at the moment.

We do what we can. The right hon. Gentleman rightly says that the Foreign Secretary is there this week with those involved in the coalition. I was there just last week. I spoke to the Government of Yemen in Riyadh, to the Saudi Government, to the UAE and to Bahrain. Ministers are constantly engaged in what we can do. We speak to those who have some opportunity to influence the Houthis as well—we do not speak directly, but we try to influence them. We raise all the issues that he did about the misery and the suffering of people. There is no part of this conflict that justifies the suffering of people, but we are constantly trying to do this, and we work through agencies to do so.

The right hon. Gentleman and the House can be sure that our political efforts will always be designed to support the work of the UN special envoy and to encourage progress. In conflict, as we know, there is weariness. It must be clear to all the parties that there is no military solution, but people who have established positions, including those involved in the coalition, want to make sure that Yemen does not become ungoverned space—a Beirut in Sana’a with Hezbollah available in empty space to conduct actions against Saudi Arabia—and we want to make sure that the Yemeni people can bring forward a political process. We are working on all this while also providing the economic and humanitarian aid he described. We will continue to do so.

Alison Thewliss: I thank the Minister for his efforts in this space. I am aware that Mark Lowcock, the UN relief co-ordinator, prior to the pledging conference, met women’s groups in Yemen. Can he tell me any more about what is being done to reach women in Yemen?

Alistair Burt: I remember some years ago—the right hon. Gentleman may remember as well—when we had that interlude after Ali Abdullah Saleh, and we looked at the national dialogue and at women’s opportunities in Yemen. It is a shorthand, but it is true: men cause wars and women finish them. The engagement of the women of Yemen will be particularly helpful. I have no doubt that when the political process gets going, they will be a key part.

I have one more minute and, with apologies to the House, will conclude simply by saying that the House can be assured that, as far as the Foreign Secretary and I are concerned, this issue is a top priority—the top priority—in the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development, and it will remain so. We will continue to apply ourselves as much as possible.

With the House’s indulgence and just a few seconds left, I want to refer to the fact that this is Sir David Natzler’s last day in office. [Interruption.] I am sorry, David—you look as if you do not want to hear it all again, but allow me. We go back a long way. Sir David refereed me a number of times in an all-party parliamentary group. We have known each other well over many years. The plaudits he received in the House from those much more eminent than I am a few weeks ago said it all about his devotion to the House of Commons and the work he has done on the public’s behalf. Speaking personally, I will miss him, and I am sure that the House will miss him and the work that he has done. We know that, both through him and those he represents in giving the best service to the House of Commons, we have been richly and well served. We wish him well in the future. Thank you, David.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): In adjourning the House, I will have one last word from the Chair as a final farewell to Sir David, who is sitting in his accustomed place for a final few moments. David, we know that you do not want to hear all this yet again, but it is because we will miss you very much. We wish you and Hilary all the very best.

Question put and agreed to.

5.30 pm

House adjourned.
The Secretary of State was asked—

Local Authority Services

1. Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of the effects of changes in the level of central Government funding for local authorities on the adequacy of services provided by those authorities. [909522]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): The local government financial settlement confirmed that core spending power for councils is forecast to increase to £46.4 billion, a cash increase of 2.8%. This real-terms increase in resources will be key to helping local authorities to deliver local services, support vulnerable residents and build stronger communities.

Mr Bailey: Ofsted has said in its latest monitoring report that despite the good work of my council, Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, it is still deeply concerned that children risk abuse due to unbearable case loads and a real problem in recruiting staff. Does the Minister think that that might have something to do with the £180 million in funding that the council has lost since 2010, and will he say whether the proposed community fund will fully and adequately restore the appropriate level of funding?

James Brokenshire: I recognise that, over some years, Sandwell has had some specific issues in relation to its children's services. I hope that the hon. Gentleman therefore welcomes the increase in Sandwell’s core spending power to £268.6 million. He will also know that the funding that was set out in the financial settlement underlay additional funding for social care, and children's social care in particular, but clearly we will keep in contact with the Local Government Association and others in respect of councils' needs.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): On Friday night, my community saw the despicable murder of 17-year-old Jodie Chesney in Harold Hill. If the Government’s serious violence strategy is to work, we need confidence that all parts of the system are adequately resourced, including councils’ children's services and social services. What assurances can the Secretary of State give me on that front, and what conversations has he had with the Home Office to talk about these most serious of issues?

James Brokenshire: I am sure that the whole House will want to send its condolences to the family of Jodie Chesney, my hon. Friend's constituents, and equally, to the family of Yousef Makki, who also lost his life over the course of the weekend. My hon. Friend highlights the appalling situation with knife crime, which has claimed too many lives. I assure her that my Department is working closely with the Home Office to look at issues of prevention and, through programmes such as troubled families, is seeking to provide preventive services. In the last couple of weeks, I have provided £9.8 million for a fund supporting families against youth crime, to help workers to intervene early to prevent such senseless violence.

Mr Clive Bets (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I have previously raised with the Secretary of State the Government’s proposal to remove deprivation as an element from the foundation funding part of the local government allocation. Is he aware of the research done by the University of Liverpool and the Institute for Fiscal Studies showing that although deprivation accounts now for only a 4% difference in spending, if we go back before austerity in 2010, in the early years before the disproportionate cuts in grants to the poorest communities, deprivation accounts for more than 10 times the amount of spending? In the light of that, will he review his decision to remove deprivation as a key element of spending allocations?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman, the Chair of the Communities and Local Government Committee, is obviously aware that there is an ongoing consultation on the formula. He highlights a point in relation to the primary formula and the way in which deprivation plays into that. We will look closely at the evidence that is presented to us and I encourage him to take part in that consultation.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I declare my interest as a member of Kettering Borough Council. At its budget last week, the council confirmed that it will achieve a 10-year council tax freeze, and despite cuts in Government spending it has maintained all frontline services and support for the voluntary sector. Is that not an example that other councils should follow?

James Brokenshire: I warmly commend Kettering Borough Council for the work that my hon. Friend outlined, and indeed councils for the way in which they have risen to the challenges. I commend all the work of the members and officers in Kettering for being able to deliver good-quality services in an efficient way.
James Brokenshire: I note the hon. Gentleman’s point about asylum dispersal and the costs of that. Obviously, the Home Office leads on how funds are supported in different authorities—indeed, in Scotland as well—and I will certainly pass on his points to the Home Secretary.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): On funding to local communities and the Stronger Towns fund announced earlier today, can I get an idea of how much Crawley constituency will get? It has two of the most deprived wards anywhere in the south-east. I do not want to hear from the Front Bench that we are on the B list where we can bid for funding. This funding is needed now.

James Brokenshire: As my hon. Friend will know, there is a statement coming up later this afternoon, so I will save my comments for that, but it is a £1.6 billion fund, with a competitive element, and I would encourage people to bid into that.

Mr Speaker: I am sure that the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) will be in his seat for that statement and will leap to his feet to make his point with his customary force and alacrity.

James Brokenshire: I remind the hon. Gentleman of my response to the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts). That issue is part of our consultation on the review of relative needs and resources, and I encourage the hon. Gentleman to take part. Our view is that a lot of the measures are based on deprivation is factored into any future fair funding review?

James Brokenshire: I remind the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) that that issue is part of our consultation on the review of relative needs and resources, and I encourage the hon. Gentleman to take part. Our view is that a lot of the measures are based on population distribution, but we will reflect on the evidence as we see it.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State and our excellent local government Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), for the additional moneys given to East Sussex County Council for this year, but rather than additional one-off funds to top up, can we have more certainty in the future so that all local authorities can plan for the future?

James Brokenshire: I recognise the desire for long-term local government funding, and we have the local government financial settlement, which the House recently approved. We also have the spending review to come, and I will certainly be making the case for a multi-year settlement.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The European regional development fund moneys of £476 million and the European social fund moneys of £465 million have had a significant input into local government funding the length and breadth of Scotland. With the removal of this EU cash imminent, can the Secretary of State tell us precisely how much money the Scottish Government and local authorities in Scotland will get after we leave the EU?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady will know the guarantees in place in relation to structural funds currently provided by the EU, but clearly we want new arrangements in place through the UK’s shared prosperity fund. We will come forward with the details of that fund, and the spending review will set out the monetary aspects.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): After nine years of this Government’s slash-and-burn approach to deprived areas, the Secretary of State has announced a new fund for our left-behind towns, but since 2010 we have seen a cut to Wigan Council’s spending power—the Government’s preferred measure—of £67 million and a cut of £45 million to Blackpool’s. As a region, the north-west has lost almost £1.5 billion but will receive just £281 million over seven years under this initiative. Does he understand why Members across the House feel disappointed and patronised by his announcement today?

James Brokenshire: I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman has not recognised the additional funding that will be going into local government this coming year. The cash increase I have outlined is a real-terms increase to local government that is focused on supporting issues such as social care. Yes, the Government recognise the hard decisions that councils have had to make, but we are now supporting councils to do the right thing for their communities and ensure the improvement we all want to see.

Andrew Gwynne: It is only an increase for councils because it is predicated on those same councils increasing their council tax to mitigate a £1.3 billion Government grant cut. The announcement that the Minister has made today means very little, given that he plans to shift the funding formula away from those very same left-behind towns in future years to favour the wealthy Tory shires. Will he now remove any uncertainty, and ensure that deprivation is factored into any future fair funding review so that it is actually able to live up to its name?

James Brokenshire: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman has clearly not been through the consultation, which demonstrates on various issues such as social care where deprivation is firmly relevant. We are ensuring that we provide support for councils. The hon. Gentleman keeps saying “baseline”; he seems to have gone into some kind of trance. We are providing £650 million for social care in the settlement for the forthcoming year because we absolutely recognise local authorities’ demands and needs; it is about seeing that local government is well supported for its communities.

New Homes

2. Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the time taken to build new homes.

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): Last year more housing was delivered in England than in all but one of the past 31 years, but there is still much more to do, from reform of the planning system and developer contributions to deploying Homes England as the WD40 of the house building industry, working on the recommendations of the Letwin review, and accelerating
decision making in the Department. We are stretching
every sinew to build more and better homes across the
country, and to build them faster.

Mary Robinson: Building homes that people want to
live in should be a challenge that we set ourselves as we
aim to tackle the housing situation. Modern methods of
construction encompass new and innovative building
methods, including off-site manufacturing, to produce
more homes in less time. During a recent visit to a
modular homes factory, I saw how well constructed,
well insulated and adaptable homes for life can provide
quality housing in weeks rather than months. Does my
hon. Friend agree that local authorities should recognise
the diverse range of construction methods when developing
their local plans to meet housing requirements?

Kit Malthouse: With her usual accuracy and perception,
my hon. Friend has put her finger on one of the most
exciting developments that we are currently seeing in
house building, which is indeed off-site manufacturing.
That technique holds enormous potential, not least
because it is deployed to a significant extent in other
parts of the world. We have a £450 million fund
to support its development, and the first payment was
made to Welwyn Hatfield just last week.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the
Minister not realise that this Government are not
building enough new homes? Even the ones they are
building are not in the right places for the right people.
Is he not aware of the scandal—a situation my constituents
cannot understand—that so much of the money that
went to Help to Buy has ended up in the pockets of
chief executives of building companies?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Gentleman is right, in that
Governments of all stripes have failed to build enough
homes over the last few decades. Indeed, our efforts to
correct that were hampered by the destruction of 50% of
the small house building industry in the crash of 2008,
when his party was in government. We have tried very
hard to correct that, and last year we managed to reach
a total of 222,000 homes, but we must push forward to
300,000. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will join me in
supporting its development, and the first payment was
made to Welwyn Hatfield just last week.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): We need to
build new homes but they must be the right homes. In
2017, the then Secretary of State the right hon. Member
for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) said:
“It’s unacceptable for home buyers to be exploited through
unnecessary leaseholds”,
and added that “enough is enough”. He said that real
action was needed and announced that the Government
were banning the sale of leasehold homes. Last summer
the current Secretary of State promised no new Government
funding schemes for leasehold homes, yet the Government’s
own figures show that Ministers are pouring hundreds
of millions of pounds of taxpayers’ money into a
state-funded racket by subsidising large house builders
for the sale of leasehold homes through Help to Buy—some
17,000 homes over five years, half of which have been
sold since the Government promised to ban that. Can
the Secretary of State tell us: have the Government
forgotten what they said, has he changed his mind, or can
he let us know when he will deliver on his promises?
Mr Speaker: I enjoyed the hon. Lady’s question, but it would nevertheless have benefited from the generous application of the blue pencil.

Kit Malthouse: I urge the hon. Lady to take care with her opinion of Help to Buy as a scheme: it is one of the few Government policies for which people actually stop me in the streets to thank me. [Interruption] Even though it had nothing to do with me, I am quite happy to take the credit for the policy—for the origination of it in any case. Several people have stopped me and thanked me for it, because it gives young people access to homes that otherwise they would not obtain.

The hon. Lady is right, though, that problems have been experienced in the market with leasehold, and we are determined to bring about change. The new Help to Buy scheme will be used to bring about some of that change, and the Secretary of State tells me he has not resiled one ounce from his promises.

Future High Streets Fund

3. Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): What plans he has to use the future high streets fund to transform town centres.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): I am delighted to announce that this year will see the return of our Great British High Street awards, in proud partnership with Visa. That is part of this Government’s determination to keep high streets at the heart of our communities, not least supported by our future high streets fund.

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer. Paignton town centre is in need of reshaping and regeneration to create an attractive destination for the future, hence it will be the focus of a bid for support from the future high streets fund. Can the Minister confirm that Paignton is precisely the type of town centre he has in mind that will benefit from this fund?

Jake Berry: My hon. Friend is a redoubtable campaigner for his high street and I have previously met him and local authority leaders to talk about their ambition for Paignton. I am sure, as always, by my hon. Friend.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): One of the problems the Minister might encounter in improving the high streets could be described as a roadblock, because it is a roadblock: the problem is that our roads are just so poor. I was disappointed that Hull missed out on the transforming cities fund to improve a road that is notorious for being an absolute roadblock: Calvert Lane. Will the Minister therefore look favourably on Hull when it bids for this money again—or alternatively just give us the cash now?

Jake Berry: I suspect that we are going to hear many special pleadings on behalf of hon. Members’ constituencies across the House. This is an ambitious fund that is designed to transform towns, just like the towns fund that we have announced today. I am sure that the hon. Lady and the area that she represents will bid for all the appropriate funds to drive forward her community.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): One of the main findings of the recent Select Committee inquiry into town centres was that strong local civic leadership is crucial. Given that, may I ask the Minister to ensure that, when judging future bids to the fund, strong local leadership is a key criterion?

Jake Berry: My hon. Friend, an expert in this area, rightly points to the excellent Select Committee report on high streets. He will be aware of the recommendation of Sir John Timpson, one of Britain’s best loved and best known retailers, that local leadership should be key to driving forward the future of the high street, and we will certainly be looking at that as part of these fund applications.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The Government’s plans for a puny 2% digital tax on mega online firms that avoid paying their fair share is an insult to shops on the high street in towns such as Grange, Windermere and Kendal. Will he support higher taxes on tax dodgers, which would raise enough money to slash business rates for our town centres and help to save our high streets?

Jake Berry: The Government have been clear that online taxation in retail needs to be done as part of an international agreement, but we have also been clear that, if we cannot get such an agreement, we will come forward with our own 2% tax on online retail to ensure that we can continue, as we did in the last Budget, to give relief to those retailing on our high streets.1 This year, we have already slashed a third off the business rates of shops with a rateable value of under £51,000.

Homelessness: London

4. John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce levels of homelessness among Scottish people in London.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): I thank my hon. Friend for his interesting question. Preventing and reducing homelessness and rough sleeping are key priorities for this Government. We have implemented the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and allocated more than £1.2 billion in funding through to 2020. Through the rapid rehousing pathway early adopters, we will enable more than 80 navigators to work with up to 1,600 rough sleepers.

John Lamont: Scots account for 12% of the homeless population in London. Borderline is the only charity that provides support to Scots in London, yet, astonishingly, the Scottish Government stopped its funding last year. Will the Minister join me in congratulating Borderline on the work that it has done and continues to do? What more can this Government do to support homeless Scots in London?

Mrs Wheeler: I thank my hon. Friend for his tenacious work in looking after Scots wherever they might be, north or south. The withdrawal of that funding is, sadly, a matter for the Scottish Government, but we have allocated more than £220 million of funding to

1. [Official Report, 4 March 2019, Vol. 656, c. 8MC.]
London, largely through the flexible homelessness support grant and the Move On fund. Our expert advisers are supporting local authorities to tailor their services according to local need, particularly for our Scottish friends.

**Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The number of homeless households seeking help in Hounslow—including some from Scotland—has doubled in the past 10 months. Hounslow has an admirable record, including a five-year programme of delivering 3,000 new social rent homes, yet it is losing council stock faster through the right to buy. Will the Government recognise that they have to take responsibility for delivering adequate numbers of social rent housing in order to deal with the homelessness crisis?

**Mrs Wheeler:** The hon. Lady is quite right to say that ensuring that we have enough affordable homes in London and elsewhere is a high priority for this Government, which is why we changed the rules on housing revenue account funding, and I look forward to the authority building even more houses than it has already.

**Adult Social Services**

5. **Thelma Walker** (Colne Valley) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of funding for adult social services. [909526]

16. **Julie Elliott** (Sunderland Central) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of funding for adult social services. [909537]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government** (Rishi Sunak): This Government have recognised the pressures facing adult social services and have provided councils with access to an additional £10 billion of dedicated funding for adult social care for the three years up to 2019-20.

**Thelma Walker:** I thank the Minister for his response. However, 96% of all local authorities told the Local Government Association that there is a major national funding problem in adult social care. Demographics are changing and demand is growing. What are the Government doing to provide long-term sustainable support to local authorities such as Kirklees Council, so that they can deliver vital services to our most vulnerable citizens?

**Rishi Sunak:** I thank the hon. Lady for her question. In the short term, £1 billion of extra funding for social care services was announced in the Budget. In the longer term, the Department of Health and Social Care will soon outline its Green Paper and a longer term sustainable settlement. However, the answer is not just about the amount of money that we spend. Her council is a fantastic example of providing good outcomes for social care by using taxpayer resources prudently. Just last week, it was named a top 10 council for social care.

**Julie Elliott:** The Princess of Wales Centre dementia day-care facility, which is based in the neighbouring constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) but serves the whole of Sunderland, recently announced that it will close in June, partly due to the cut in local government funding. What will the Minister do to help to support my constituents and those of my neighbour before the extra funding becomes available? Will he meet me and my colleagues to discuss the matter?

**Rishi Sunak:** I would be happy to meet the hon. Lady and her colleagues or, indeed, her local council. Obviously, as she just heard me say, the Budget announced an extra £1 billion for social care, which her local authority will be able to use on its own priorities, perhaps including the example that she raised.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Bob Blackman.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Honours were even on Saturday.

I congratulate the Minister on what he has done on adult social care, but one problem is that many people are asset rich but cash poor, and early intervention is required to prevent those people from degrading. What can he do to encourage local authorities to intervene early so that people live a healthier, longer life?

**Rishi Sunak:** As ever, my hon. Friend makes an excellent point. He is right about the importance of early intervention, whether it is with young families and children or people who are older and frail. The Government recently announced an increase in the disabilities facilities grant, which does exactly what he says and helps people proactively to adapt their homes so that they can stay independent for longer. That is an example of the prevention work that he mentions, and he is right that we should focus on that in future.

**Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will the Minister join me in commending the excellent work of Conservative-controlled North West Leicestershire District Council? By building the new homes that our country needs and attracting business, investment and jobs, it has managed to freeze council tax since 2010 and it has pledged to freeze council tax for a further four years, if it is successfully re-elected on 2 May.

**Rishi Sunak:** I praise North West Leicestershire District Council, which I know well. My hon. Friend is a well-established champion of the council and he is right to highlight its focus on creating a pro-growth culture in its area, using the tools at its disposal to drive economic growth, keep taxes low for its taxpayers and provide high-quality local services.

**Dr Sarah Wollaston** (Totnes) (Ind): Has the Minister read the letter to the Prime Minister—it was sent last week but published over the weekend—from Health for Care, which is a new coalition of organisations that speak passionately about their view that social care is on the “brink of collapse”? Will he meet me to discuss the coalition’s concerns, the report published by the Health and Social Care Committee, which I chair, and the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, our findings and the work that we did with the Citizens’ Assembly?

**Rishi Sunak:** I praise the work done by both Select Committees in producing some options for the social care Green Paper, and I know that they are being actively considered, as they should be. To the hon.
Lady’s broader point, her characterisation is perhaps a little unfair, because good things are happening in social care. The recent publication of the delayed transfer of care statistics showed that they have halved since the peak of a couple of years ago, which shows that good progress is being made.

**Public Services: Newcastle**

6. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What steps is he taking to help ensure that public services in Newcastle are adequately funded. [909527]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): The most recent local government finance settlement confirmed that core spending power in Newcastle is set to increase by £3.4 million in 2019-20. The North of Tyne devolution deal, for which there will be an election this May, will see £600 million invested in the area and, as part of the 2017 Budget, we announced our support for the £0.5 billion investment programme for the Tyne and Wear metro system.

Chi Onwurah: Since 2010, successive Conservative Governments have cut funding for children’s social care in Newcastle by 40% and, at the same time, the number of looked-after children has risen by 40%, which is obviously untenable. Instead of talking about strengthening local authority funding when he has halved the amount available to Newcastle City Council, will the Minister instead say whether he agrees with the national charity Action for Children, which has called these cuts “devastating and dangerous”? Will he give us the money to look after our children?

Jake Berry: We have just announced an additional £400 million to tackle exactly that. The hon. Lady and I have met in her city on occasion and talked about the northern powerhouse. I am inspired by the engineers of the north-east; he is inspired by Ken Livingstone and Derek Hatton. My candidate for the Newcastle and North of Tyne election.

Jake Berry: On a recent visit to Bishop Auckland, I had the privilege of visiting the hon. Lady’s high street. I am sure she would agree that the inspirational work taking place at the Bishop Auckland project, where a charity, in partnership with the local authority, is coming forward with an ambitious plan to regenerate the high street, is exactly what the Government should be looking to support as part of their future high streets fund. Although I am sure we are both passionate about Bishop Auckland, I disagree with her, because one way we can ensure that high streets thrive is to ensure that the free market can determine planning and that people are free to open shops in the sectors they see fit at the appropriate time.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): In high-value areas such as St Albans, previous planning reforms have meant that office space has been turned over to residential. Couple that with high business rates and there is a serious danger of losing much of our high streets in many areas similar to mine. What more can be done to help on business rates? The £51,000 limit is welcome, but it has not helped many of my businesses in St Albans.

Jake Berry: The reduction in business rates for shops with a rateable value under £51,000 is, of course, part of a wider package. My hon. Friend, as a campaigner for her high streets, will appreciate that the change from the retail prices index to the consumer prices index, and the other changes to make revaluations more frequent—

[**Mohammad Yasin**]: The announcement that Bedford will lose its Marks & Spencer store after 100 years is a massive blow for our town centre. Will the Minister accept the recommendations of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee’s report and commit to helping local authorities such as mine that need urgent funding to redevelop our town centres?

Jake Berry: I said in response to an earlier question that I think the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee’s report is excellent, and we are considering it at the moment. I have sympathy with the local authority in Bedford and the challenge it faces with the closure of M&S, which is why I recommend that the hon. Gentleman, together with his local authority, makes an expression of interest in the Government’s future high streets fund by 22 March. The fund is designed to help areas to ensure that high streets remain at the heart of their community, which is exactly where they should be.

Helen Goodman: People who live in Spennymoor, Shildon and Bishop Auckland in my constituency feel that the decline in their high streets symbolises the fact that they are not listened to in general. So cannot the Minister understand that the proposal to bypass the planning rules on permitted development is exactly the wrong way to go? What we want is more involvement and more control for local neighbourhood communities.

Jake Berry: I think the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee’s report is excellent, and we are considering it at the moment. I have sympathy with the local authority in Bedford and the challenge it faces with the closure of M&S, which is why I recommend that the hon. Gentleman, together with his local authority, makes an expression of interest in the Government’s future high streets fund by 22 March. The fund is designed to help areas to ensure that high streets remain at the heart of their community, which is exactly where they should be.
on the matter. I feel certain that he is interested in not only what he has had to ask, but the views expressed by other Members.

Jake Berry: You never know, Mr Speaker, but the hon. Gentleman might be interested in what I have to say, although I doubt it. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: The Whip says that the Minister is pushing his luck, but he must not get down on himself. People should be interested in hearing what the Minister has to say. The hon. Member for Bedford has, belatedly, stayed after all and we are pleased about that.

Jake Berry: This is not just about the help the Government have set out on business rates; it is also about ensuring that high streets remain fit for the future. It is all very well for the Opposition Front-Bench team to scoff against the free market, as they did during my response earlier, but let us not forget that the people who ply their trade and work as retailers on the high street are the embodiment of all that is good about British entrepreneurship.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): Mendip District Council has made some excellent inclusions in our local plan for rejuvenating high streets in the district. Will the Minister commend the council’s work and look favourably on any bids it brings forward to help to fund the transformation of our high streets?

Jake Berry: I absolutely commend Mendip District Council and my hon. Friend for their work on taking forward a bid for their high street. He and his area will be aware, as will all other areas in the country, that they have until 22 March to put in an expression of interest—100% of the boroughs that receive the cash will have applied for it, so I suggest they get on with it.

Homelessness

8. Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce homelessness.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Tackling homelessness and rough sleeping is a key priority for this Government. We are spending more than £1.2 billion on homelessness through to 2020, with our rough sleeping initiative delivering more than 1,750 additional beds and 500 support staff. We recently published our delivery plan for the rough sleeping strategy, which will help us see rough sleeping become a thing of the past.

Daniel Kawczynski: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. I say to him unequivocally that there are still not enough resources going into rural shire counties such as Shropshire to deal with this issue and many others, but does he agree that the rapid rehousing pathway announcement will be crucial in solving rough sleeping?

James Brokenshire: I know that my hon. Friend has been a champion for Shropshire and I commend him for his work on homelessness and on other issues. He rightly highlights the rapid rehousing pathway. That is a key part of our rough sleeping strategy to see that support and care are provided quickly and to see people getting off the street into homes, with all the assistance they require.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): Homelessness in Birmingham has increased by nearly 1,000% and almost 100 people have died homeless in the past five years. This is a moral emergency. My interviews with homeless people show that collapsing healthcare services are part of the problem, yet the homeless people in our city have a primary care system rated as “inadequate”. What steps can the Secretary of State take to fix this—not when the service is recommissioned in two years’ time, but now, before more people die?

James Brokenshire: I recognise the right hon. Gentleman’s passion, and indeed we have spoken about the situation in Birmingham. I hope he will acknowledge the additional funding that will be going to Birmingham in the next financial year through the rough sleeping initiative and the funding that NHS England has committed to health services for rough sleepers. Clearly, I will want to know and be certain that funding is applied to Birmingham and those areas where we have seen an increase in rough sleeping, for the very purpose that he underlines; we can save lives.

Brownfield Sites

9. Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support building on brownfield sites.

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): Our national planning policies are clear about the importance of making full and efficient use of brownfield land, supported by the requirement for every authority to publish and maintain a register of brownfield land suitable for housing. The £4.5 billion home building fund also provides support for new housing, much of it targeted on brownfield land.

Michael Tomlinson: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer and for visiting the old power station site in Poole, one of the largest regeneration sites in the south-west. What more can he do to help to unlock brownfield sites such as that, which will provide the homes that we need and protect our green belt?

Kit Malthouse: It was a great pleasure to spend some time with my hon. Friend and his esteemed neighbour, our hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Sir Robert Syms), at the power station site in Poole. I would recommend it as a place to visit, not least to see the remarkable harbour bridge, which is a feat of British engineering worth visiting in itself. There is much that we can do in terms of applying funding, but the application of Homes England is critical to getting brownfield sites over the line. Homes England is becoming much more entrepreneurial and assertive in its use of the funds and the capacity we have given it to make these sites work. As we speak, it is releasing thousands of homes throughout the country.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The City of York Council administration has an abysmal house building record, and we have seen a net loss of
social housing. We also have the largest brownfield site in the country, ready to be developed. In order to expedite matters, will the Minister say when he plans to announce the Government’s response to the right-to-buy receipts review, so that we can get house building moving?

Kit Malthouse: I have not been a Minister for long, but I have learned to use a word well honed in government, which is “shortly”. We will respond shortly but, more than that, it would give me enormous pleasure to visit York at some point over the next few months and view what I know is a large site with great potential that Homes England has already talked about in excited terms. Having had a fantastic weekend with my family in York just last year, it would be a great pleasure to repeat the experience.

Mr Speaker: Those outside the Chamber observing our proceedings could usefully know that in government the word “shortly” sometimes contains elasticity.

24. [909546] Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Brownfield sites can bring forward supply, which is good for everybody, but what can the Minister do in particular for students to make the supply of their accommodation more easily available and fairer for renters?

Kit Malthouse: That is a remarkably crafty attempt by my hon. Friend to shoehorn in a question about student housing. He is absolutely right that brownfield land offers enormous potential for all sorts of housing throughout the country. In fact, you might be interested to know, Mr Speaker, that in 2016-17 some 56% of all new homes were delivered on brownfield sites, and that will have included student accommodation. In truth, the secret to student accommodation is the same as that for all sorts of other accommodation: supply. The more there is, the cheaper it will be and the more providers will compete on quality.

Mr Speaker: Well, I am somewhat better informed, and I thank the Minister for that.

Alison Thewlis (Glasgow Central) (SNP): EU funds have been used to decontaminate brownfield land, making it suitable for development. A prime example of that is at Shawfield in the Clyde Gateway area. The Clyde Gateway has received £6 million of EU funds for decontamination work in the Shawfield area in South Lanarkshire, which borders on Glasgow. Recently, hexavalent chromium contamination from the former J&J White chemical works has seeped into the Polmadie burn, and it will cost tens of millions of pounds to clear up. It would be good to hear from the Minister exactly whether the shared prosperity fund will include any mechanism to cover brownfield land. Otherwise, it will go unremediated in future.

Kit Malthouse: There will be no intention to leave any sod of brownfield land unturned throughout the country in our quest for space to build the homes that the next generation needs. The hon. Lady makes a serious point and she is right that in the spending review and the consideration of arrangements as we leave the EU, we need to look to reproduce the capacity to deal with all that contaminated land, which is perhaps a relic of our industrial past but now holds enormous potential for the future.

Local Authority Finances

10. Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the financial sustainability of local authorities. [909531]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): The hon. Lady will be aware that the recent settlement confirmed a real-terms increase in the resources available to local authorities. The Government responded to pressures faced by councils in the autumn Budget and supported financial sustainability with more than £1 billion of additional funding across this year and next.

Mr Speaker: Order. Before I call the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), we are very short of time so I hint that the hon. Members for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) and for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) could usefully seek to take part in the exchanges on this question, if they were so inclined. It would work perfectly well.

Bridget Phillipson: Since 2010, Sunderland City Council has been forced to make cuts of more than £290 million, yet the announcement today of the so-called stronger towns fund will see only £105 million for the whole of the north-east region put together. Given that our communities will be hit hardest by this Government’s Brexit plan, does the Minister seriously expect us to be grateful for this announcement, and does he expect us to support another decade of Brexit-driven austerity and decline?

Rishi Sunak: I gently point out to the hon. Lady that the towns fund that she talks about has the highest per capita allocation exactly to her area, and it is something that she should be welcoming for her constituents. Beyond that, the only way sustainably to provide and fund the services that we care about is to drive economic growth, efficiency and innovation. I am glad that her council participated in our digital innovation programme, and that 100 other local authorities are benefiting from our business rates pilots to keep more of their economic growth in their local community.

11. [909532] Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): From the £1.6 billion post-Brexit stronger towns fund, how much can Yorkshire and Humber expect to receive after we leave the EU, and will this money be used to get fair funding in place?

Rishi Sunak: I know that the Secretary of State will be making a more detailed statement on the towns fund later when I am sure that he can address my hon. Friend’s specific question. This is a separate process from the fair funding review, which is, I know, something that all colleagues are interested to hear. That process is regarding ongoing spending and that will be done through the spending review later this year.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Will the Minister say how the financial sustainability of local government is helped by what amounts to negative rates support grants, where councils are paying in more to central Government than they get back?
Rishi Sunak: Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman was not here for the recent local government settlement. It is exactly because of the threat to sustainability that this Government eliminated negative RSG, which is something that the sector had asked for and we were pleased to meet that concern at the recent settlement.

14. [909535] Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): The historic funding settlement does not reflect the shift in population by many families and older people from city to county areas, increasing the demand in those areas for high-value services. Will my hon. Friend say what more we can do to make the finances of local government in county areas more sustainable?

Rishi Sunak: We take funding for county areas extremely seriously, and it is of course important that the new funding formula accurately reflects needs brought about by changing demographics on the ground. I can assure my hon. Friend that I will continue to work with him, the County Councils Network and others to ensure that our new formula is fit for the future.

Topical Questions

T1. [909547] Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Today marks 12 months on from the Novichok attack in Salisbury. Our thoughts remain with all those affected by this appalling crime, and we remain determined to see those responsible brought to justice. I pay tribute to the people of Salisbury for the strength and resilience they have shown and for the way that the community has come together at a time of incredible challenge. I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in thanking not only those involved in the clean-up operations, but everyone who has worked so hard to support Salisbury’s recovery from this incident.

At a time when we need to show our resolve in standing up against division and hatred, I want to thank hon. and right hon. Members from across the House for their incredibly moving contributions during last week’s antisemitism debate and to everyone who supported yesterday’s “visit my mosque day”. Strong communities will be a key to success post-Brexit, and I will be making a statement to the House on the new flexibilities and freedoms that will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

Mr Speaker: I remind colleagues that topical questions are very brief. A sentence or so is quite sufficient. We do not need a long preamble. Chris Philp, get in there, man.

Chris Philp: Does the Secretary of State agree that promoting and encouraging home ownership is important? Recent figures on first-time buyers are, of course, encouraging, but what more can the Government do to encourage first-time buyers through starter homes and discount market homes and the prioritisation of first-time buyers over foreign speculators?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend has set out a number of important ideas. I certainly welcome the recent statistic showing the number of first-time buyers at a 12-year annual high. There are further measures through the national planning policy framework, which include an expectation that local authorities secure 10% of new units for affordable home ownership including discount market sales and starter homes.

Mr Speaker: No more than two sentences, I am sure—John Healey.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

One year on from the Salisbury poisoning, we stand with the people and the city, and we applaud their resilience. The other message from Labour is also clear: such foreign aggression on our soil will never be tolerated.

Four weeks to Brexit, yet the Secretary of State is part of a Government who still threaten the country with a final collapse in negotiations and a crash-out exit. He may say that a no-deal Brexit is not his preference, but he supports this remaining an option and he is part of a Cabinet preparing for it. How many fewer homes will be built each year in the event of a no-deal Brexit?

James Brokenshire: The right hon. Gentleman should be more positive as to the future for our country. Indeed, we look to secure a deal that can command support from this House to ensure that our country—our United Kingdom—can look proudly to the future. Rather than talking things down, we should be talking up what we can do as a country—and, yes, securing a deal that takes us out positively and that ensures that we have that bright, positive future.

John Healey: Well, the Secretary of State has either not done the analysis or he refuses to share it. The Bank of England says that house prices could plunge by 30% on a no-deal Brexit—almost double the fall after the global banking crisis. A Labour Government kept Britain in business after that global financial crash with a big stimulus programme and a new low-cost house building programme as its centrepiece. If he still cannot say no to no deal, will he commit to a new stimulus of at least £4 billion for new low-cost homes next year so that, come what may, those who need new homes will not pay the price of this Government’s mess of Brexit?

James Brokenshire: That is interesting. The right hon. Gentleman might reflect on the mess that his Government caused in terms of crashing the economy. We have a £9 billion affordable homes programme, and £2 billion beyond that in terms of long-term investment in affordable homes, as well as the new flexibilities and freedoms that councils will have to borrow to build. This is about that focus on building the homes our country needs and the support that this Government are giving to achieve that.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): I commend my hon. Friend for championing his constituents. I do agree that town councils can empower local...
Communities. Southport electors can petition Sefton Council to be given their own town council through a community governance review, and I know he will lead them in doing exactly that.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): A recent report from Shelter states that permitted development is a totally “unsuitable method of solving the housing crisis”, and a Guardian piece at the weekend gave an example of permitted development rights flat conversions that are smaller than tiny hotel rooms and have no natural light and no communal space. The Government are presiding over a new generation of slum development. When are they going to deliver the properly planned, good quality, safe and healthy homes that our country and communities desperately need?

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): Permitted development rights have produced 46,000 homes over the past three years. Those homes have to come from somewhere. They are not, as the hon. Lady said, slums. All permitted developments have to comply with building regulations. As she knows, we are currently reviewing building regulations to see what can be required. As part of the work on the social housing Green Paper, we may well also look at the decent home standards that could, in time, apply to the private rented sector.

T5. [909551] Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): When the last bank in town moves out, as is happening in Millom in my constituency, what is being done to ensure that remote and rural communities do not suffer economic and social hardship?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): My hon. Friend is absolutely right. She is passionate about the high streets in Millom and more widely across her constituency. The loss of the last bank is of concern. The high streets in Millom and more widely across her constituency. The loss of the last bank is of concern. That is why we are supporting the Post Office banking framework, which will ensure that 99% of personal banking customers will be able to keep their face-to-face banking at their local post office.

T2. [909548] Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Last week, the children’s sector told us that funding for children’s services has fallen by 29% in less than a decade, and councils, including my own in Stockton, have been forced to cut spending on non-statutory early interventions by half. Will the Secretary of State commit to press the Chancellor to come up with the desperately needed cash for these vital services?

Rishi Sunak: I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the importance of prevention and early intervention, which is why the Government have funded the troubled families programme by almost £1 billion over this Parliament. It is doing fantastic work, working with some of the most vulnerable children in our society, enabling them to stay out of care and out of harm’s way.

T6. [909552] Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): Last week I launched my “Towns of the future” campaign to help preserve and protect our high streets locally. What steps is the Department taking to minimise the number of empty properties on our high streets and persuade landlords to find new tenants?

Jake Berry: The people of Morley and Outwood are extremely fortunate to have in my hon. Friend a Member of Parliament who can bring detail to retail, given her lifelong experience in the sector. I absolutely support her “Towns of the future” campaign. I am sure that she is aware of the Government’s “Open Doors” pilot, which is working with landlords and local authorities to help fill empty shops.

T4. [909550] Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The week before last, the teenager Kamali Gabbidon-Lynck lost his life to multiple stab wounds. The local authority has dug deep to help with community safety, but will the Government consider a special fund for children at risk of school exclusion?

James Brokenshire: I recognise the important point that the hon. Lady makes. Indeed, the specific fund I referenced earlier, through the troubled families initiative, is focused precisely on those steps, to ensure that we can support troubled young people who might be drawn into gang crime, but I am happy to discuss with her further the specific issue she highlights in her constituency.

T7. [909553] Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the visit of the Philippine ambassador to Southend this morning to explore investment opportunities and joint partnerships after we leave the European Union, during which he expressed his astonishment that Southend is not already a city?

James Brokenshire: I am not unsympathetic to my hon. Friend’s long-standing campaign to turn Southend into a city, given that it is my birthplace. I therefore welcome any initiatives that see investment in Southend, and I commend the work that he is doing.

Sir David Amess indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: Indeed, Southend will probably judge that it should have its very own ambassador from the Philippines—not merely an ambassador visiting Southend, but an ambassador to Southend.

Mr Speaker: I am giving the hon. Gentleman ideas, I know.

T8. [909554] Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Cheshire and Warrington were promised a decision on their devolution growth deal by November 2017. Why the delay? When are we going to get a decision?

Jake Berry: I met the leader of the Cheshire and Warrington local enterprise partnership only last week, and we discussed progress on its growth deal. We remain committed to working with it to see when progress can be made, but it is absolutely vital that the leaders of the three unitary authorities and all the Members of Parliament affected renew their commitment to the deal if we are to make progress.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler)

I thank my right hon. Friend for that question; he has been fighting for this cause through high seas and low seas, and I congratulate him on all his work. Houseboat owners are protected under the Consumer Rights Act 2015 and the Protection from Eviction Act 1977. The consumer rights Green Paper published by the Government last year set out principles to further improve the rights of all consumers, including houseboat owners, and the Government’s response will be published this year.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): Labour leaders of Burnley and Hyndburn Borough Councils have joined Conservative leaders of Pendle Borough Council and Lancashire County Council to raise their serious concerns about the Government’s proposal to remove deprivation as a factor when determining local authority funding. Will the Minister listen to that cross-party call for fair funding and today announce that he will drop the proposal?

Kit Malthouse: There is obviously a concerted attack taking place against permitted development rights, which I find distressing, given the sheer number of homes that they have produced for people who are desperate for those homes. As I have said, all homes, whether under permitted development rights or normal planning permission, have to comply with building regulations, and it is down to local authorities to ensure that that is the case.

Julie Cooper: The Secretary of State recently confirmed at the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee that the Government have undertaken no evaluation of the impact of permitted development rights since they were expanded in 2013. While the Minister states that more than 46,000 homes have been delivered under the policy, he can have no accurate idea of the quality of those homes. Amid increasing reports of appalling quality, unsafe homes being delivered under permitted development rights, will he pause this policy so that a proper evaluation can be undertaken?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend is indefatigable and has raised that issue at every opportunity when I have been at the Dispatch Box. He is right that, as part of our affordable homes programme, we would like to see more discount market sales, particularly to younger people across the country. I urge local authorities, which we hope are bringing forward authoritative and forward-looking plans, to embrace that type of tenure.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): The number of homeless families in Coventry has more than tripled over the last three years, while the number of homeless children has increased eightfold in the last five years, with more than 600 children spending Christmas in temporary accommodation. Why does the Secretary of State think that the number of homeless families and children has increased so significantly under this Government?

James Brokenshire: The factors that lie behind this are complex, but I can assure the hon. Lady of our absolute commitment to deal with the challenges of rough sleeping and homelessness through the £1.2 billion that we have committed, as well as the initiatives announced at the end of last week on opening up the private rental sector to deal with temporary accommodation pressures. I can assure her of our resolution to increase supply, prevent homelessness and deal with some of the challenges we see today.
Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Ordinarily points of order come after urgent questions and statements, but I have a sense that the right hon. Gentleman’s point of order relates to today’s business, and therefore I will take it and any related matters now.

Mr Mitchell: Thank you, Mr Speaker. You may recall that on 1 May 2018, in new clause 6 of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill, this House resolved that the overseas territories must establish registers of beneficial ownership by the end of 2020. It has recently come to our notice from statements made by a Foreign Office Minister in the other place that it is the Government’s intention arbitrarily to extend that date by no less than three years to the end of 2023, in a flagrant breach of what was agreed by this House.

That is made yet worse by the fact that, at the urging of the Foreign Office, the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), with whom I tabled new clause 6, only agreed to extend the date to the end of 2020 in view of the terrible damage done to many of the overseas territories in recent hurricanes and storms. The Hansard report of our proceedings makes that absolutely clear. Mr Speaker, how can this House seek your protection from the egregious sleight of hand being proposed by the Foreign Office?

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Thank you. I will respond, but let me hear the other points of order on this matter.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I concur entirely with everything that has been said by the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell). I see this as a blatant, deliberate and arrogant snub of this Parliament, and I ask you, with your excellent experience, to support us in taking this forward.

I simply add that today’s business has been delayed: it has been deliberately taken off the Order Paper by the Government. Today’s business included an amendment, in my name and that of the right hon. Gentleman, which would have not just extended public registers to Crown dependencies, but reiterated the point in relation to overseas territories. We were so angered by the action of the Foreign Office that we wanted to reiterate the decision of Parliament, which was passed unanimously by Parliament last summer, and in the amendment we were proposing today, but that opportunity to reiterate our determination has been removed from us as well.

I again urge you, Mr Speaker, to advise us what we can do and what you can do to ensure that the Government do what Parliament tells them to do in legislation.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. First, this matter, even were it dealt with in 2020, would have been long overdue. It was an issue that was critical for the Public Accounts Committee when I was the Chairman of it many years ago, so it is a long overdue issue. Secondly, it is not a question of the will of the House, but of the laws passed by this House. The intention of the House was that the instruction to bring an Order in Council in 2020 ought to be carried out in 2020, and that is clear from the Hansard of the time.

As the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) says, the business that has been pulled today was about protecting the reputation of the City of London. That reputation will not be protected if it is felt by our competitors around the world that our family, as it were, are allowed to have standards that are lower than those of the City of London. Mr Speaker, will you seek advice from Speaker’s Counsel about how we can ensure that laws passed by this House are carried out by this Government?

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Further to those points of order, Mr Speaker. Not only is tackling financial crime and money laundering essential for the reputation of this country, but if the Government feel that they can get away with changing a date contained in an amendment to legislation passed by this House in relation to this Bill, what is to stop them doing it on lots of other bits of legislation?

Further to the Government’s decision today to pull the Bill at the last minute—I think that is a discourtesy to the House, since it was on the Order Paper—have you, Mr Speaker, been given any indication by Government Ministers about when and whether they intend to return the Bill to the House not only so that we can fix what they have tried to do, but to add further protection in this matter covering the Crown dependencies as well as the overseas territories?

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the right hon. Gentleman.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP) rose—

Mr Speaker: I assume the hon. Lady wishes to raise a point of order appertaining to the same matter.

Alison Thewliss indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: Finally, I call Alison Thewliss.

Alison Thewliss: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. To follow on from where the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) left off, this Bill—the Financial Services (Implementation of Legislation) Bill, left the Public Bill Committee on Tuesday and, at business questions on Thursday, it was notified for today, which meant that amendments had to be laid by Wednesday—the day before. Then we arrive this morning to find that the Bill has been pulled from the House with absolutely no notice or explanation. Will you tell the House, Mr Speaker, whether you have been given any indication about how long the Government will be running scared for?

Mr Speaker: First, may I say to the right hon. Members for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) and for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), before I turn to the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), that it is a most unusual state of affairs, although extremely welcome in parliamentary terms, that two former Secretaries of State for International Development from either side of the political divide and two former...
Chairs of the Public Accounts Committee from either side of the political divide should be present in the Chamber at the same time and, apparently, acting in concert to highlight their grave consternation about this important matter? Their efforts, which may or may not have been co-ordinated, have been underlined and buttressed by the hon. Lady.

Those points of order warrant a response, and this is mine. First, to a degree—although, I accept, only to a limited degree—the right hon. and hon. Members have found their own salvation in the sense that they have taken the opportunity to air their disquiet, not to say extreme dissatisfaction, at what is by no means an unprecedented but a most unusual turn of events, and those points of order are on the record. No business has been pulled as yet, although I gather that it has been heavily trailed that this afternoon’s main business—the first and primary piece of business—is intended, I say for the benefit of observers, not to be moved by the Government; that is to say, it cannot proceed today. Beyond that, I have no power to act on the matter, but it is a most unusual state of affairs.

Members ask whether I received any advance notice of this from Government. The answer is no, and there has been no indication of when Ministers intend to bring forth that business, but I want to say this. The business was announced only on Thursday, so it was clearly the Government’s intention on Thursday last that the business should be treated of by Parliament today. It is, if I may say so, a rum business, to put it no more strongly—all of a sudden, the business that was scheduled for today has been evacuated from Parliament; it has been air-lifted from the premises; it has suffered a mysterious and hitherto unexplained disappearance.

It is a very odd state of affairs altogether. One can speculate as to why that may be so, but it is a most unusual state of affairs, and it is at the very least very discourteous to the House of Commons. It probably reflects a degree of anxiety and, if I may politely say so, perhaps just a little inexperience. It is not the sort of thing that would happen when the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield was in a senior position with responsibility for Government business, but things change and people who are perhaps less well-versed in these matters than him have been left to handle things as best they can.

That is the first thing. The second thing that I say to right hon. and hon. Members is that the legislation may have been delayed, but presumably it will have to come back. Here is the substantive point. Members have asked what I as Speaker can do. The answer is that Members have been complaining about the perversion of the purpose of a new clause that was accepted in earlier legislation. That purpose, and any current new clause or amendment, can feature again in the business. Insofar as it is for the Chair to select a new clause or amendment, people would expect that the Speaker would give an indication of his thinking. I had certainly intended to select either a new clause or an amendment on this matter today. For the avoidance of doubt, because I know that there has been some private lobbying on this matter, the proposal emanating from the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield, was entirely orderly. Whatever others thought of it outside this place, or even beyond this country, it would have been perfectly proper for it to have been debated and voted on in this House. If Members wanted to know whether I would have selected that proposition for debate and a vote, the answer is absolutely yes, because it was proper for Parliament to treat of it. It will have to come back, and doubtless it will be considered. I just hope that Parliament will be treated with rather greater courtesy in future on this matter than it has been until now. People really do need to raise their game. I hope that that is clear. [Interruption.] Very well.
Knife Crime

3.49 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Home Secretary if he will make a statement on knife crime.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): This week our two teenagers, Jodie Chesney and Yousef Ghaaleb Makki, were stabbed to death. I am sure I speak for the whole House when I express my deepest condolences to their families and their loved ones; two young lives, tragically lost. They are the latest victims in a cycle of senseless violence that is robbing young people of their lives right across this country. There is no hiding from this issue. Serious violence is on the rise. Communities are being torn apart and families are losing their children. Last year, 726 people were murdered in the UK. 285 with a knife or bladed weapon, the highest level since records began.

After the horror of this weekend, I welcome the chance to come to the House and address this issue. We all wish that there was just one thing that we could do to stop the violence, but there are no shortcuts and there is no one single solution. Tackling serious violence requires co-ordinated action on multiple fronts. First, we need a strong law enforcement response. This includes the Offensive Weapons Bill, currently before Parliament, which will introduce new offences to help to tackle knife crime. We also need to give police the confidence to use existing laws, such as stop and search.

Secondly, we must intervene early to stop young people becoming involved in crime. We have amended the Bill to introduce knife crime prevention orders, which will help to prevent young people from carrying knives. Alongside our £200 million youth endowment fund, the £22 million early intervention youth fund has already funded 29 projects endorsed by police and crime commissioners.

Thirdly, we must ensure that the police have the resources to combat serious violence. I am raising police funding to record levels next year—up to £970 million more, including council tax. On Wednesday, I will meet chief constables to listen to their experiences and requirements.

Fourthly, we must be clear on how changing patterns of drug misuse are fuelling the rise in violent crime. I launched the independent drugs misuse review, under Dame Carol Black, in response to that.

Fifthly, we need all parts of the public sector to prioritise tackling serious violence. That is why I will very shortly be launching a consultation on a new statutory public health duty to combat violent crime and to help protect young people.

We must all acknowledge that this is an issue that transcends party lines. Politics can be divisive, but if there was ever an issue to unite our efforts and inspire us to stand together, then surely this is it.

Louise Haigh: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, for granting today’s urgent question. I thank the Home Secretary for making time to respond to it.

Today, the House is united in grief and shock at the tragic toll of the past couple of weeks, adding to the hundreds of children murdered in our communities over the past year. In Birmingham, over the space of just 12 days, three teenage boys have lost their lives: Sidali Mohamed and Abdullah Mohammad, both 16 years old; and student Hazrat Umar, 18 years old. On Friday, Jodie Chesney was killed in a knife attack in an east London park as she played music with her friends. She was 17. Yousef Makki was stabbed to death in a village near Altrincham. He was 17. It adds to a 93% rise in the number of young people being stabbed since 2012.

These senseless murders are a national tragedy that must cause us to reflect on how the promise that these young boys and girls represent could so senselessly be extinguished. But it must also be a cause for action. One life lost in an act of violence is one too many; one mother who will never see her son or daughter again is one too many. This is a national crisis, and it requires national leadership from the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary to provide whatever support is necessary to help the police investigate and fight this outbreak, and to provide communities and services with whatever resources are necessary to protect our increasingly vulnerable young people.

May I put the following questions to the Home Secretary? Back in 2000, the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, took the decision to activate the emergency Cobra committee and set a target for bringing violent street crime, which was then at a peak, under control. We need to see similar leadership today from our Prime Minister. Will she step up and convene a crisis summit backed with emergency funding? Will the Home Secretary confirm that that will take place this week? If not, why not?

Underpinning the cross-Government effort the Home Secretary mentioned has to be a public health approach to tackle the root causes of violence. This was something we thought the Government favoured too, encompassing youth services, school exclusions, housing, social services, mental health and health as a whole. It was therefore shocking to hear the comments from the Health Secretary. This country is facing a crisis. It is time for leadership.

Will she step up and convene a crisis summit backed with emergency funding? Will the Home Secretary confirm that that will take place this week? If not, why not?

Finally, we cannot pretend that the cuts to policing have not made our country less safe. Sadly, the Prime Minister and other members of her Cabinet continue to deny this crucial link. In the coming weeks, police will have the heavy responsibility of running investigations into young lives lost and bringing perpetrators to justice. The funding settlement that we voted on last month is completely inadequate to allow them to do that, especially for the forces hardest hit by violent crime. Will he urgently review the funding settlement to ensure that the forces that have seen the biggest increases in violent crime are given whatever they need to fight this outbreak?

This country is facing a crisis. It is time for leadership from our Prime Minister and our Home Secretary, for clear action and a united vision from all arms of Government, and for emergency funding for the police and prevention programmes to keep our children safe. Warm words are no longer enough.
Sajid Javid: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions. She started, quite correctly, by talking about how the House is united in its grief with regard to all the deaths that we have seen, particularly of young people, not just in recent days but over the last number of years, when we have seen an increase in these tragic crimes that are dividing communities and causing so much pain for so many people.

The hon. Lady asked me three questions. First, this is a huge priority across Government. That is why, almost a year ago, the Government set out a serious violence strategy with over 60 actions taking place that involve not just Government but other public agencies and bodies. To help implement those actions, we also set up a serious violence taskforce, which is cross-party and includes people such as the Mayor of London, so that we can make sure that we are working well not just within central Government, but across public bodies.

That brings me to the hon. Lady’s second point: the public health approach, which I announced towards the end of last year. Again, that came through listening to experience both from other parts of the UK and other countries that have seen a similar rise in serious violence. We should learn from wherever we can. It is important to have such an approach, which requires all Departments and agencies of Government to treat serious violence in the way we would treat, for example, a disease—to prioritise it and make that a statutory duty. That is why I welcome the support for that approach from hon. Members across the House. As I said, because it is a statutory duty, it will require legislation. That begins with a consultation, which is to take place shortly.

Thirdly, the hon. Lady asked about funding and resources. As I mentioned, I have long recognised that in tackling serious violence, there is no one single course, but having the right amount of resources is vital. That is why we set out in the House earlier this year an increase of up to £970 million for policing—almost double the increase in the year before and the largest increase since 2010—which will lead to a significant rise in capabilities, including in the number of officers. Finally, alongside that, we have announced a record allocation to early intervention, especially helping young people through the £200 million youth endowment fund, which is the biggest such investment that any Government have ever made.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker.

The other day I went out on patrol with the police in my area. In two and a half hours in the borough of Waltham Forest, we attended two knife attacks, one threatened knife attack and a shooting, and that was not even prime time. None of those made it into the media, by the way, so what is being reported is only the tip of the iceberg.

I want my right hon. Friend to ensure that we do this. There is enough evidence now of what works and what does not work. The Glasgow concept—of this being a public health issue—is not just about public health; it is about the co-ordination between the police and all the local authorities. Will he direct someone to co-ordinate the actions of all 32 London boroughs, focus on the safer streets process, which allows action to take place, and agree to immediate expenditure for voluntary sector organisations that can get children out of the gangs?

Sajid Javid: I thank my right hon. Friend for all his work, particularly through the serious violence taskforce, which he regularly attends. He made an important point about being led by evidence, and he pointed to the public health approach and rightly mentioned Glasgow. He also rightly highlighted the importance in a capital city of greater co-ordination. It is to ensure just that that we are working closely with the Mayor of London, local authorities and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The recent spate of murders by stabbing of children and young people across Greater London and England has shocked and horrified everyone. On behalf of the Scottish National party, I extend our deepest condolences to all those bereaved by these senseless acts of violence.

We are acutely aware of the problem of knife crime in Scotland, because until recent years it was a terrible scourge, but, as others have alluded to, as a result of a radical change of approach to the problem, the incidence of knife crime in Scotland has greatly reduced, and crimes of handling an offensive weapon decreased by 64% between 2007-08 and 2016-17. I think we all know now that this occurred because of a holistic approach that involved the creation of a violence reduction unit, initially in Glasgow and now for the whole of Scotland and funded by the Scottish Government, that treats violent crime as a public health problem and a social problem.

Scotland has also employed a whole-systems approach to young people at risk of offending that, rather than criminalising, labelling and stigmatising young people, provides early and effective interventions that keep young people out of formalised justice settings, and this includes the No Knives, Better Lives youth engagement programme.

All of this has been a huge success, which is why the Mayor of London, senior representatives of the Metropolitan police and senior representatives of the UK Government, including the Solicitor General, have all been up to Scotland in the last year to explore what lessons can be learned. The public health approach to knife crime is also advocated by the World Health Organisation. What specifically have the Home Secretary’s Government colleagues learned on their visits to Scotland? Can he tell us the precise extent of his plans to follow the Scottish model? If he is planning to do it, when is he going to do it?

Sajid Javid: The hon. and learned Lady rightly points to Scotland and its own experience. It is important in tackling serious violence that we learn lessons from across the UK, and indeed the world—the public health approach she talked about has been tried in other countries and cities as well. I said we needed action across multiple fronts, but it is hugely important that we pursue that. It will require a consultation, because it is statutory, which is important to make sure that hon. Members and others have the opportunity to have an input, mould it and make sure it is as effective as it can be. I do not want to prejudge the outcome of the consultation, but there is a strong sense of support. The cross-party serious violence taskforce, which I referred to earlier, had a presentation on this last year where we heard from experienced people about how it can help,
and it is something that we plan to pursue. I look forward to working with friends and colleagues in Scotland to see how they can help.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Will the Home Secretary ask the Mayor of London to consider as a matter of urgency adopting the plan put forward by Shaun Bailey for funding an extra 2,000 police officers through reducing waste at City Hall and public affairs spending?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend makes an important point about the need to ensure that everything is being done throughout the United Kingdom, including our capital city, to deploy as many resources as possible to law enforcement and efforts to prevent young people from turning to serious violence in the first place. The work being done by Shaun Bailey and others is important in that regard, and I hope that the recent increase in central funding will help as well.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Fatal stabbings are now at their highest level since the second world war, and the number of youth stabbings has doubled in five years. Teenagers are dying on our streets, and families are being devastated as a result. I agree with what the Home Secretary said about a public health approach, but that is why it was so concerning to hear the Health Secretary dismiss such an approach—the Home Secretary did not respond when his comments were raised earlier. That creates a feeling that there simply is not the right sense of urgency and grip across the Government on this crucial issue: this morning a former Metropolitan Police Commissioner warned of a lack of national leadership.

Does the Home Secretary believe that all the measures that he talked about earlier will lead to a fall in knife crime and in the number of serious stabbings in the next 12 months? If he does not, this is not a good enough plan.

Sajid Javid: I welcome the right hon. Lady’s comments. I do believe that the action that we are taking is the right action, but I am also very open-minded about considering what further action can be taken. I think it important to listen to police chiefs, police and crime commissioners and others, and to consider whether other measures can be introduced. The idea of knife crime prevention orders came directly from the police, the Mayor of London and others, and we acted very quickly to pursue that.

As for the public health approach that the right hon. Lady and others have mentioned, it is important for all public Departments to buy into it. I want it to be statutory because I want Departments including the Department for Health and Social Care, the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Department for Education to make it a priority: I think that they all have an important role to play.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): What action are the Government taking to ensure that enough resources are available and preferably targeted on this priority, and what further action can they take to spread best practice from places that have had more success?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend has raised an important issue involving co-ordination and the need to make the most of the resources that are there. Last September I launched the national county lines co-ordination centre, which was intended to ensure that police forces and the National Crime Agency worked together. It is early days, but, having visited three police forces across the country over the last few weeks to see how the system was working, I know that it is bringing real results through co-ordination.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): The public health approach in Scotland also involved a cross-party approach, with much of the work beginning under Labour and continuing under the Scottish National party. The whole House wants the Home Secretary to succeed, but we have been on alert since Tanesha Melbourne-Blake was killed in my constituency on bank holiday Monday almost a year ago.

I am grateful to the Home Secretary for allowing me to be part of the taskforce in that cross-party spirit, but the questions today are really about the Government’s grip, because of what we heard from the Health Secretary this morning. What more can the Government do? I ask that question particularly because county lines is being driven by a demand for drugs, and we have cut our Border Force as a result of austerity.

Sajid Javid: First, let me thank the right hon. Gentleman for the work that he does, in the taskforce and elsewhere, in combating and helping to combat serious violence. He is right about the importance of a cross-governmental approach, and of ensuring that all parts of Government are joined up.

The right hon. Gentleman understandably raised the issue of drugs and drug seizures, and he mentioned the Border Force. Last year, the amount of class A drugs seized by Border Force was threefold higher than in the previous year, so it is up. That said, the volume of these types of drugs across the world has increased dramatically, and that is leading to some of the gang warfare we are seeing, especially the spread of county lines. So more needs to be done: more needs to be done both through the public health approach but also the other interventions I have just set out.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah yes, an Altrincham knight: Sir Graham Brady.

Sir Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale West) (Con): May I first give my deep condolences to the family of Yousef Makki, the young man whose life was tragically taken in my constituency on Saturday evening, and may I also thank Greater Manchester police for their rapid response to give some reassurance to the community?

The Home Secretary has spoken of increased resources going to the police. When he meets senior officers in the coming days, will he urge them and seek to persuade them to make sure as much as possible of that new resource goes to increasing the numbers of frontline officers, to give greater reassurance to communities the length and breadth of our country?
Sajid Javid: I join my hon. Friend in the condolences he just expressed; it is a truly senseless loss of life. He is also right to commend the response of Greater Manchester police to the tragedy.

My hon. Friend asked about resources. In terms of the increase in funding I referred to earlier—£970 million this year—it is good to see that almost all police forces across the country, including GMP, have responded by saying they will be hiring a significant number of officers to add to the frontline. The figure is almost 3,000 in total so far, but it is good to see that police forces across the country are looking to see what they can do to make a real difference.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): No one doubts the Home Secretary’s desire to do something about knife crime across the country, but does he not recognise that for months this House has been crying out for the Government to get a grip; it has been crying out for the Government to do more about this? Belatedly, we all seem to be recognising that it is a national crisis—a national emergency. In the face of national emergencies—whether terrorism, flooding, or foot and mouth—the Government convene Cobra, because Cobra drives the Government forward with an urgency and passion that is lacking at present. Will the Home Secretary go back to the Prime Minister and say that we need to convene Cobra—we need to bring the right people together to drive forward with the enthusiasm and desire that this needs to be tackled as the national emergency that it is?

Sajid Javid: This is a hugely important priority issue across the Government: it was discussed very recently, just in the past few weeks, in the Cabinet, and just a couple of weeks ago we had a debate in this House on serious violence, both to set out the Government’s plans but also to listen to hon. Members across the House on new initiatives that can be taken forward. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to talk about this being an urgent priority, and it is important that we all work together to see what more we can do.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Are sentences served long enough?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend will know that, as recently as 2015, changes were made to sentencing for serious violence crimes, including with bladed weapons. While it is right that the courts make decisions on sentencing based on the evidence and the facts in each case, we have seen a rise in custodial sentences. That is important, too, to make sure the right message and right deterrent are set out for these horrible crimes.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): A primary school in my constituency recently told me that the three and four-year-olds who are likely to be vulnerable to gangs can be identified in the nursery, often because they have grown up in households afflicted by domestic violence or drug and alcohol abuse, or where other family members are in gangs. Yet our school budgets and Sure Start centres have been cut, making early intervention far more difficult. Has the Home Secretary had any conversations with the Treasury about proper funding for very early intervention, and if not, why not?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady raises the important issue of early intervention, including very early intervention. A ministerial taskforce is looking at this issue and trying to do more in this space, and work is being done. Through my Department, work is already being done on the early intervention youth fund, which has made allocations to more than 20 social enterprises, including those that are helping people to exit from gangs. Also, the draft Domestic Abuse Bill sets out to help young people who are more likely to be vulnerable to committing crimes themselves, perhaps because of their own life experiences.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I, too, extend my sympathy to the families affected by those two ghastly crimes. Has my right hon. Friend asked the chief constables how many more officers they all need to put on to our streets? Has he ever asked that question, and as he had an answer? How many officers are needed to physically patrol the streets of our country?

Sajid Javid: I regularly speak to chief constables across the country about their needs, in regard not just to serious violence—although that is of course a priority for almost all of them—but to the whole host of crimes they are trying to deal with. The information that we get from chief officers will then feed into the annual police settlement. This year, as I have mentioned, the police settlement has the largest cash increase since 2010.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I should also like to add my condolences to the families of the recent victims. I am a mother of four, and I cannot even begin to understand what those families are going through. Extensive research now shows that adverse childhood experiences, such as abuse, neglect or a parent in prison, can severely harm a child’s development. Too many children with multiple adverse childhood experiences are excluded from school, which in turn can lead them to become involved in gangs and violence. If we are to tackle this epidemic of youth violence, we need an approach—perhaps we can call it a public health approach—that is trauma-informed to care for children with ACEs. We also need much lower numbers of school exclusions. Will the Secretary of State liaise with the Department for Education on school exclusions, please?

Sajid Javid: I agree with the hon. Lady’s points about young people suffering from trauma and who may have witnessed abuse, including in their own household. She is absolutely right to raise this. We talked earlier about experiences in Scotland, and there have also been some valuable experiences in Wales, especially on trauma-based therapy. She is also right to mention school exclusions. I welcome the independent work that is being done on this by Edward Timpson, and we will be working with the Department for Education to take that forward.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): The Home Office has told me in a written answer that it does not collect statistics on the association between knife crime where people are killed or maimed. However, the serious violence strategy that was published last year tells us that in 57% of all homicides, either the victim or the offender is either a drug dealer or a drug user. The Secretary of State has asked Dame Carol Black to carry out an honest assessment of our capability and capacity to address this threat, but she is not allowed to consider whether we can take this threat out the hands of criminals
altogether. The Americans learned a very hard lesson in the 1920s and 1930s when they prohibited the drug alcohol, and the entire world has learned a very hard lesson in the global war on drugs over the past 50 years. Why cannot we carry out an honest assessment of the costs and benefits of prohibition?

Sajid Javid: This Government do not support the legalisation of these types of harmful drugs. I respect my hon. Friend’s firmly held views, but the class of drugs that we are talking about is hugely harmful to anyone who takes them, especially young people. The answer is to look at how the misuse of drugs is driving violent crime and other crimes, and that is exactly why we have asked Dame Carol Black to look into the misuse of drugs. There is no question of legalising any of those harmful drugs.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): While I appreciate the Home Secretary’s tone, I am unsure whether the reality totally matches up with what he is saying about. On school exclusions, he talks about an evidence base and following the evidence, but the overwhelming evidence is that those who are excluded from school end up getting involved in drugs, youth violence and gang activity. The Timpson review is long overdue, and we are not expecting it to be all that powerful. Given that we have been raising such issues for a long time, will the Government now look at the powers that local authorities need to ensure that children in their communities are getting an education? This atomised, fragmented school system means that too many are falling through the net.

Sajid Javid: I agree with the hon. Lady. That it is vital that the whole issue of exclusions, alternative provision and pupil referral units is looked at properly, and it is vital that we follow the evidence. She seems to prejudge Edward Timpson’s report, but I have a great deal of confidence in him. He is an experienced individual who will take the issue incredibly seriously, and we need independent evidence. However, if the hon. Lady is suggesting that we do not need to wait for that to do more work, she is right about that, too. Work is already ongoing between my Department, the Department for Education and others, but the report will certainly help.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Following on from the previous question from the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), although I strongly welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement, the fact is that 40 children are excluded from our schools every day, either on fixed or temporary exclusions—4,000 such children have special educational needs—and a former Metropolitan Police Commissioner has said that that is a major cause of knife crime. We know that excluded children are twice as likely to carry knives and that children are being off-rolled. We must ensure, as the Education Committee report suggested, that schools are accountable for the pupils they exclude, that there is transparency and that this approach is the No. 1 priority for dealing with knife crime.

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend speaks with great knowledge of this issue, and I welcome the work that he and his Select Committee have done. Like the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) before him, he is right to raise the issue, which is critical if we are to deal with serious violence and drug misuse properly. The number of exclusions seems to be heading in the wrong direction, and it is important that we look at the links between that and crime. I welcome what my right hon. Friend says and the work that he is doing through the Education Committee.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Following another tragic wave of violence over the weekend, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care dismissed treating it as a public health issue, contradicting the Government’s apparent plans to tackle violence with a public health approach. Has the Home Secretary spoken to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care at all about the Government’s plans to adopt a public health approach?

Sajid Javid: I mentioned earlier that serious violence and the priority of tackling it was discussed in Cabinet in the past few weeks, and the matter is being taken seriously in every Department. The Department of Health and Social Care is key if the public health approach that I have talked about is to be success.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): The impact of knife crime across London has been horrific in recent months, but has the Home Secretary seen the recent extraordinary comments from the Mayor of London? He said that it would take him 10 years to deal with the London knife crime epidemic—longer than anybody has served as Mayor—yet his website says that he has responsibility for the “totality of policing” in London. My constituents and other Londoners will not wait 10 years, so what discussions has the Home Secretary had with the Mayor of London?

Sajid Javid: The Mayor of London is an important partner in this, and he is a member of the serious violence taskforce. We do not have 10 years to deal with this, of course not. There are certain things that will take time, but there are also things that could be done that would have a much more immediate impact, such as some of the legal changes that will be brought in by the Offensive Weapons Bill. My right hon. Friend highlights the need to work together in partnership.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Ind): The public health and public education approach, together with more police officers, is obviously right, but was not the former Metropolitan Police Commissioner correct this morning when he said that, ultimately, our young people need to know they are better off not being in possession of a knife than having that knife? Therefore, is it not time for us to have clearer mandatory sentencing for those caught in possession of a knife without just cause?

Sajid Javid: When the former Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Lord Hogan-Howe, speaks, it is important that we listen. I have great respect for him and for others who have served in our police. The issue of sentencing is very important—I mentioned earlier that there have been some changes in sentencing—and it is also about making sure that we have the right laws in place, which
is why I welcome the support across the House, including I believe from the hon. Gentleman, on the new Offensive Weapons Bill.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): The Home Secretary has outlined some important measures, including this year’s police settlement, which means 100 extra officers in Leicestershire, but what role does he see for longer sentences and stiffer penalties for knife possession as part of his strong plan?

Sajid Javid: Changes were made to the sentencing regime in 2015, but it is right that, when we consider the responses to the rise in serious violence and, especially, the tragic deaths that have occurred, we make sure our sentencing is right. That is why, through the work being done across the Government, it is time for us to look again at sentencing.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I grew up under the cloud of gang violence in Birmingham. When I was a teenager, it was really quite bad. It was dangerous for us when we lived there, and in the years since, I have found myself working tirelessly to try to improve the situation, which we had managed to do. Now I receive letters from my children’s inner-city comprehensive school about how to spot whether my children are in a gang. We have gone straight back to day one. Nothing the Home Secretary has said allays my fears as a parent of a teenage boy in Birmingham. There used to be a police officer based at almost every inner-city school in Birmingham. None of them is there now. Why is that the case?

Sajid Javid: I hear what the hon. Lady says very clearly, and I am listening carefully. I also grew up in a place that, sadly, had lots of gangs and crime, and no one wants to see that in any community. I understand what she says. She specifically asks me about policing, and just last week I went to see some of the work that West Midlands police are doing with other police forces. Much more resource is going into fighting both gangs and drugs. As I mentioned earlier, the increased resourcing will directly lead to many more officers on the frontline.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): My right hon. Friend talked in the past of suspending social media accounts as one tool to help tackle this dreadful scourge and the needless loss of life we are seeing. How are his discussions going with the social media companies, which are integral to achieving that aim? Does he think we need to look again at sentencing policy?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend raises another important issue on the role that social media might be playing in spreading serious violence. Last year, I provided £1.4 million of funding for a new social media serious violence hub so that the Metropolitan police can work with social media companies and specifically focus on this very issue. He knows that the Government will shortly be publishing an online harms White Paper, which will also look at this important issue.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I am sure the Home Secretary will agree that behind every fatal stabbing and shooting is a young person’s future cancelled, and a family left grieving and wondering for the rest of their life. “How could this have been prevented?” He has demonstrated that he knows what needs to be done—it is about interrupting the drugs industry, early intervention and having more police on the street—so why on earth we need yet another consultation is beyond me. What we do need is for him to come back to this House, within the next week, with a definite plan about how to deal with this and proper resources behind the plan. I ask him to do that, because he already knows what needs to be done.

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right when he talks of the tragic deaths, lives being cut short, all those opportunities that are forever gone and the impact on those families. I think he was referring to the public health approach and asking why it would require a consultation. That is because it is supposed to be a statutory approach. We could have taken the non-statutory route. That would have been quicker, frankly, but I think it would have been less effective because I need every Department—colleagues have mentioned the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education—to make this a priority. We have talked about the experience in the other parts of the UK and in other countries. It has been a statutory approach. With very few exceptions, there is a requirement with such an approach to have a consultation to make sure it is legally watertight.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): Warwickshire police are currently recruiting an additional 150 officers and extra officers are part of the solution here. My right hon. Friend has talked about a wider cross-Government approach and using resources of the whole of the Government. Can he say more about how we can get those resources and that approach down to the local level, where it is really going to make a difference?

Sajid Javid: I welcome the announcement by Warwickshire police. On other resources, a vital one that I mentioned earlier is support for organisations, mainly community organisations, to tackle the issue early on, through early intervention, especially to try to turn young people away from what might become a life of crime. The early intervention youth fund has already allocated funds to more than 20 projects, but the new youth endowment fund, which I said I would be publishing information on very shortly, will be allocating some £200 million very shortly to do just that work—early intervention.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Jodie Chesney, Charlotte Huggins, Tudor Simionov, Nedim Bilgin, Lejane Richards, Dennis Anderson, Aliny Mendes, Simbiso Aretha Moula, Sarah Ashraf, Asma Begum, Kamil Malysz, Bright Akinleye, Glendon Spence, Che Morrison, David Lopez-Fernandez, Kamali Gabbidon-Lynn, Brian Wieland and Jaden Moodie—I am not sure that that is a complete list of everyone who has been killed by a knife in London this year alone, but I can tell the Home Secretary that the taskforce, the consultations and the more reports are not working. What on earth will it take for him to recognise that this is an emergency that requires an emergency response?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady reminds this House that this is such a tragic loss of life. She talked of those lives cut short in London. There are colleagues here representing seats across the country where we have, sadly, lost lives.
She is absolutely right to highlight this but, as I said, I really wish standing here that there was just one simple answer—just one single thing that could be done. We require action across multiple fronts and the best way to achieve that is for all of us to recognise that and to work together to deliver it.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): As I regrettably advised the House earlier today, on Friday night, 17-year-old Jodie Chesney was murdered in my constituency. She was a bright, beautiful and kind young woman and she did not deserve to die in this way. The public are losing faith in our ability to control our streets and they need to see and feel a step change in our response to public safety concerns. Can the Home Secretary tell me what he is doing at all levels of governance—at Home Secretary level, Prime Ministerial level, Mayoral level and local council level—to draw together our response to these tragic incidents? Will he join me in paying tribute to the members of the community and the police officers who came to Jodie’s aid when she was lying there in her final moments?

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. Friend for what she has said and remind the House of the tragic loss of life when Jodie was murdered this weekend. As I said earlier, the whole House will want to send their condolences to her family and loved ones. My hon. Friend is right to point to the work of the police and emergency services and how they responded to that tragedy, and of course I join her in commending their work.

My hon. Friend asked specifically about the work being done across Government. This issue is a priority for all of Government, across all Departments, some of which are more important to this issue than others. Obviously, I am starting with my own, but we have also heard in the House about the work in the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care. We have also heard about the work of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government—for example, the extra funding that the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has announced for the troubled families programme, to try to help to reduce violence. That kind of approach is what is going to be required to make a huge change and to reduce this senseless violence. It is going to be necessary for all Government Departments and public agencies to work together, and that means in respect of not only resources and co-ordination, but this new statutory approach, which will make a big difference.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): Lord Hogan-Howe said today that the Government do not have a grip on this national crisis. Given the fact that there have been more than 100 knife offences every day over the past year, he is of course right. The Home Secretary said that he needs every Government Department to take part, but there is a silence from the very heart of Government: the Prime Minister has made no speeches, she has held no crisis meetings, she has not called Cobra meetings and she has not led any kind of serious cross-party campaign. In the past, Prime Ministers have activated Cobra because of crime levels and led cross-Government programmes that have successfully changed big societal issues of the kind we face today, and we know the evidence for what works, so does the Home Secretary not think it is now time for the Prime Minister herself to step up and lead?

Sajid Javid: I mentioned earlier that the issue of serious violence and what more can be done to tackle it was discussed in Cabinet this year, so very recently. The Prime Minister herself is making sure that all Government Departments are playing their role and is very supportive of the measures that have been set out, and also the measures I am taking to make sure that we are listening to the chief officers, police and crime commissioners and others to see what more can be done.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Just over five years ago, Hollie Gazzard was murdered in the hairdressing salon where she worked in Gloucester city centre. In an extraordinary act of courage and determination, her family created the Hollie Gazzard Trust, which worked with the police, the Gloucestershire constabulary, to learn lessons from their handling of the incident and then to fund and deliver an education programme to schools, to advise young people on the early warning signs of abusive relationships. So positive things can be and have been done at a local level to share best practice.

I am particularly interested in what my right hon. Friend had to say about Dame Carol Black’s forthcoming report, because it seems to me that, in Gloucester, as everywhere in the country, there is this huge link between drugs and drug dealing and serious knife crime that leads to deaths. The more we can learn about what best practice is in the handling of such incidents, the better we can try to tackle it in our own constituencies.

Sajid Javid: I am pleased that my hon. Friend mentioned the work of the Hollie Gazzard Trust and reminded us of how, through that tragedy, the family and friends came together to try to turn it into something that could help others. Indeed, I think the victims Minister met Mr Gazzard as well.

My hon. Friend asked me about the work that is being done to look into the drugs markets and drugs misuse. That is vital work because one thing that is clear is that sadly the changes in drugs markets seem to be driving much of this violence. If we can understand those changes better, we can come up with even more policy responses.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Has the Home Secretary tasked any individual to drive through the co-ordination, the prioritisation and the expenditure and to report back to Ministers? I simply say this because, when we faced this challenge in Government 10 years ago, we appointed the chief constable of Warwickshire to drive forward, across Government, a knife crime reduction plan, which reduced knife crime incidents through co-ordination and reporting to Ministers. He should look at what was done then and replicate it.

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Gentleman mentions an important issue about leadership. This is such an important issue that it requires, as we are seeing, leadership across different levels—not just at national level, but in local government. We have talked today about some of the mayors and their responsibilities, the police and crime commissioners and the chief constables. It is important that all that work is co-ordinated as well. The work of the serious violence taskforce, for example, is important
in this, as is the work that the National Police Chiefs Council co-ordinates and the work of the National County Lines Co-ordination Centre. So leadership at many levels is required.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The gangs operating on our streets are “complex and ruthless organisations, using sophisticated techniques”—to recruit children—“and chilling levels of violence to keep them compliant.”

So says the Children’s Commissioner in an important report published only last week. That report identifies 27,000 gang members in England and a further 34,000 children who know gang members and have experienced violent crime. That is 61,000 young people, yet only 10% of that number are known to the authorities. The Children’s Commissioner identifies serious failings among local safeguarding boards, which, in too many cases, have not made any serious attempt to understand the level of risk in their area. I understand and recognise the Home Secretary’s commitment to tackle this issue, but it seems that we are starting from a very long way back if we only now know 10% of the children who are most at risk from knife crime. How are we going to improve that intelligence picture?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that issue. He has referred to the report just last week of the Children’s Commissioner, who is on the serious violence taskforce. I very much welcomed her report. She is absolutely right to look at this whole issue of vulnerable children who have been drawn into these gangs. Hon. Members have talked about the pupil referral units in that regard as well. There are some very sensible recommendations in the report and we will be working with her and others to see what more can be done.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The past two years have seen six tragic knife murders in my constituency, including, in the past month, the murders of Dennis Anderson in East Dulwich and Glendon Spence, who died after being chased into a youth centre in Brixton. For every tragic victim, there are countless families who are living in daily fear. One mother told me recently of her teenage son. She said: “I pray when he leaves the house and I don’t breathe until he is home again.”

The public health approach cannot be implemented by public services—whether health, education, police, social services, youth services or housing—which have been decimated by nine years of austerity. When will the Secretary of State commit to not just piecemeal pockets of limited funding, but a reversal of the devastation of our public services, which is resulting in our communities living in fear?

Sajid Javid: What I have outlined today, or summarised again for the House, are what I think are some very significant increases in resourcing: the increase in police resourcing, the largest since 2010, and the record amount invested in youth intervention, including the £200 million endowment fund. Those are very significant investments. I am not suggesting for a second that the hon. Lady cannot be right that more resources might be needed. If that is absolutely necessary, of course, that is what will happen, but it would be wrong to say that they are piecemeal resources and in some way insignificant.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): When I asked the chief constable of Bedfordshire what was driving the increase in knife crime in my county, he mentioned the fact that there were too many homes where there was not a father telling young boys that carrying a knife was wrong. I hugely welcome the 160 extra officers in Bedfordshire this year, but what more can we do to support parents and families to tell all young people that real men do not carry knives and that this an unacceptably evil thing to do?

Sajid Javid: I will give my hon. Friend two responses. First, last year, we started our #knifefree campaign, which is about sending messages to young people, on the social media they use and in more traditional advertising, about the dangers of carrying a knife. Secondly, we are working with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, through its troubled families programme, to see what more we can do with those families, who are perhaps going through family breakdown or facing other issues, to get across the message that there is never an excuse to carry a knife.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): The call from my hon. Friend the shadow Minister and others for Cobra to be convened is not just about recognising this as a national emergency, which it is; it is also about ensuring that the cross-Government approach, which the Home Secretary says he recognises, is actually delivered on the ground, right across the country, with the resources needed to back it up, whether through early intervention work to identify the young people most at risk of getting involved in gangs and knife crime, or by reducing the level of school exclusions, which in all too many cases is a route into knife crime. I put it to him that what he said about resources rings pretty hollow in the west midlands, given that we have lost 2,000 police officers over the past nine years and are facing nearly 300 incidents of knife crime this year already. Will he now respond to the call from the West Midlands police and crime commissioner for an emergency funding package so that we can address this problem in a consistent and effective way?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is right about the importance of a cross-Government approach. It is something that is needed not just today; it has to be a long-term, sustained approach, with Departments and public agencies working together. That is why our cross-party serious violence taskforce involves Government Departments as well as other agencies and public authorities. It is also important that we listen to all levels of Government. He rightly mentioned West Midlands police. I have visited that area on many occasions—I visited it only recently to look at some of the work it is doing to combat serious violence. I will always listen carefully to all local police forces, including West Midlands police, to see what more can be done.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the overall tone of the Home Secretary’s responses to the questions asked by Members today. Does he agree that the approach needed to tackle this will vary dramatically across the country, from large urban areas such as London to places with towns and smaller urban areas, such as Devon and Cornwall? Will he commit to working with the police and crime commissioners for those areas, not only to co-ordinate national action, but to ensure that the local response reflects local needs?
Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right that we must ensure that we have the right approach for each area, and he has talked about the differences between some urban areas and more rural areas. Last month I was near Exeter, meeting officers from Devon and Cornwall police, including the police and crime commissioner, and I was pleased to see just how seriously they take this issue, and they talked about how the new national county lines co-ordination centre is already making a real difference.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): My constituent Sam Cook was stabbed to death a year ago in Liverpool city centre, on the night he was celebrating his 21st birthday. His mum, Gill Radcliffe, asked me to tell the Home Secretary to remember that this is not just a London issue, but a national problem. When he meets the police chief constables in a couple of days’ time, the chief constable of Merseyside police will remind him that the consequence of the scale of cuts in Government funding for Merseyside is that there are now 1,200 fewer police officers keeping our streets safe. He will also know of a 30% cut in probation services. Sam Cook’s killer was on licence, having committed another knife offence, when he killed Sam. The probation service had not given the monitoring of Sam’s killer sufficient attention, which allowed him to kill Sam. Will the Home Secretary please take this seriously across Government and address the concerns that have been caused by the scale of the cuts in multiple Departments since 2010?

Sajid Javid: First, the hon. Gentleman raises the tragic death of Sam Cook. It may have been a year ago, but it is still as tragic today as it was then, and he is right to remind the House of it. He talked about the importance of recognising that this is not just a London issue. Absolutely, it is not—it is across the country, as we have just seen this weekend, again tragically, with the terrible death in Manchester. He raised the issue of probation and making sure that it is the best it can be. Again, he is absolutely right to do so. I know that lessons have already been learned from the case of Sam Cook, but the Home Secretary is right to raise it to the Home Secretary and also to stress the importance of cross-Government work and making sure that that includes the Ministry of Justice.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): For those of us who, at the turn of the century, worked in inner-city youth organisations to try to turn young people away from the dangers of crime, this latest epidemic of knife crime is not only deeply depressing but amounts to a reversal of the good work that has been done. The Home Secretary has said that he is open-minded to all solutions and that there is no one solution to this. Will he look again at the proposal that knives for sale in retail outlets are prohibited from being anywhere outside a locked cabinet?

Sajid Javid: It is good to remind the House of the importance of early intervention. That is why we are making this record allocation of over £220 million, altogether, in early intervention projects. The retailing of knives is partly being addressed through the Offensive Weapons Bill. My hon. Friend has raised another aspect of that. As I have said, nothing should be off the table, and I would be happy to discuss it with him.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Last week, a knife attack led to the death of one of my constituents, and before Christmas three people were attacked outside a GP surgery. People are living in absolute terror. Although this is affecting young people in particular, it is affecting all communities up and down the country. Since 2010, 21,000 police officers have been taken out of our system. If the Home Secretary wants our support, he absolutely has it in lobbying the Prime Minister and the Chancellor so that we can have those police officers reinstated. The one thing he can do is to shore up our police services, because they are at breaking point and desperately need support to bring an end to knife crime. I cannot, and I know other colleagues cannot, bear the thought of having to return to this House in weeks and months to come having witnessed stories of further fatalities and deaths. That is why the Home Secretary needs to take action. Labour Members will support him to lobby for more funding, but he needs to put pressure on his Prime Minister and his Chancellor to fund our police service urgently and reinstate 21,000 officers in our system.

Sajid Javid: First, the hon. Lady rightly reminds us that these tragic crimes are of course affecting all communities—not just young people but communities of all ages. She talks about the importance of police resources. I hope that she will welcome the increase in police funding, which is the largest increase since 2010 and will help to make a big difference on the ground, including to policing in London. But I hope that she also recognises that this cannot just be all about resources. There is a need to look at police powers as well, and that is why the Offensive Weapons Bill is very important. It is also about resources in other areas such as early intervention.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The Secretary of State spoke of other countries using the public health approach. The Scottish violence reduction unit’s methods have been shared with South Africa, Jamaica and Lithuania, for instance. That unit was set up in Scotland in 2005. While we will never be complacent, as recent terrible events in Edinburgh showed, the unit’s approach has broadly been extremely successful. I want to ask him, because it genuinely puzzles me, why has it taken so long for the UK Government to take a serious interest in this proven national strategy for reducing serious violence and knife crime?

Sajid Javid: I would like to answer the hon. Lady’s question directly. The reason is probably that serious violence in England had been falling quite significantly for some time, but as I said at the start of this urgent question, we have sadly seen a significant rise in the last two or three years especially. That has rightly led my predecessors and me to work with others and look at what more can be done. It is right to look at evidence across the nation. She talked about the very important example in Scotland, which is being looked at.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I want to express my thanks to the emergency services for their rapid response to a stabbing in my constituency last week. There is a huge amount of fear and concern in the community, and people understand that this is not a problem with one solution. Does the Home Secretary understand, as my constituents do, that whether it is the
legs taken out of community policing by police cuts, slower referrals because of cuts to children’s services, the conditions that children are living in in temporary and overcrowded accommodation or the fact that youth services have been gutted, there are many facets to tackling knife crime, and they all have one thing in common: the policies of this Government for the last nine years have made it harder, not easier, to tackle this crisis?

Sajid Javid: First, I join the hon. Gentleman in commending the emergency services for the work they have done in his constituency and elsewhere. He highlights the importance of recognising the need for a cross-Government response; it is not just about the Home Office, although we have the most important role to play. For other Departments to play that role, they need to make it a priority, which is why a statutory public health approach is very important. We also need to ensure that Departments have enough resources and that those are prioritised.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): I agree in principle with multi-agency working. I know that it works, because when I got elected in 2001, it worked. When the police were properly funded, when Sure Start centres were properly funded, when youth services were properly funded and when schools were properly funded, it worked, because we eliminated gang crime, knife crime and gun crime by the middle of that decade. We worked together with the community and the police, who attended community meetings, to do that. We do not have the staff at the moment to come to those meetings, let alone attend some of the crimes. If the Home Secretary wants to do something about this, let us not talk about piecemeal funding. Let us look at properly funded, it worked, because we eliminated gang crime, knife crime and gun crime by the middle of that decade. We worked together with the community and the police, who attended community meetings, to do that. We do not have the staff at the moment to come to those meetings, let alone attend some of the crimes. If the Home Secretary wants to do something about this, let us not talk about piecemeal funding. Let us look at the real figures about the police and community support officers we have lost and talk about how he is going to get them back, to save our future generations.

Sajid Javid: First, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support of the multi-agency public health approach. I hope we will have his full support for that when it comes forward in Parliament. He talked about the importance of resources. He said that there is a piecemeal increase in resources, but the increase in police resources is hugely significant—it is up to £970 million, which is almost double what was there the year before and the biggest increase since 2010—and the £220 million on early intervention is a significant increase.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) rightly said that we need a step change in response to this national emergency. There are two starting points for the Home Secretary: first, he needs to brief the Health Secretary on what a public health response to this epidemic is, and secondly, he needs to advise the Prime Minister to convene Cobra, so that we can focus properly on this issue.

Sajid Javid: If we take all the responses, especially in the last two years and since the adoption of the serious violence strategy, it is a step change. As I said earlier, I really wish that just one single thing could be done, but this requires action on multiple fronts. That is why the public health approach is so important. The Department of Health and Social Care is an important partner in that, and the Health Secretary understands that.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): If this nationwide knife crime crisis is not a good reason to call Cobra, what exactly is?

Sajid Javid: Responding to the increase in serious violence requires a sustained effort, with action that needs to happen now, building on the initiatives I have already set out, and long-term, sustained action, which is exactly why we have the serious violence taskforce. It is important that it remains a cross-party taskforce to make sure that we are looking at all the things that can be done and that we sustain that effort.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Young men and women are dying on the streets—three in recent days in Birmingham alone, mourned by their families—and I meet teenagers in Erdington who are now afraid to go out at night. Of course a public health approach is vital, and we urge the Home Secretary to back the bid for a violence reduction unit to bring together all agencies to combat growing knife crime effectively.

However, that is not enough; we need more police officers. Forgive me if I say this, Mr Speaker, but the Home Secretary spoke about record resources. The previous Government put 17,000 extra police officers and 16,000 police community support officers on the beat. This Government have put 21,000 police officers, including 2,100 in Birmingham alone. Does the Home Secretary not accept that there is an inevitable link between falling police numbers and rising crime, and in particular rising knife crime?

Sajid Javid: As I have mentioned, the increase in police resources this year is a record increase. It will take total police resourcing to approximately £14 billion, and the increase is the largest since 2010. It will lead to a significant increase in officers: almost 3,000 officers—I think, at least 2,700—across the country. When it comes to the local response—the hon. Gentleman mentioned the west Midlands; he is right to do so, and I welcome the focus on serious violence by the local force—I am more than ready, as I have already been doing, including with his force, to sit down with the police and see what more can be done.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Sadly, Southwark is one of the communities worst affected by knife crime, with the two most recent stabbings in my constituency on 24 February. The Prime Minister has apparently said today that more must be done to tackle this problem, after nine long years in the Home Office and Downing Street. Will this Home Secretary please meet me, representatives and organisations from across Southwark that are working to tackle this problem, especially those representing the families directly affected?

Sajid Javid: First, I would be very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman. He is right to highlight what he has seen in his area. Recently, I visited one of the leading hospitals in south London that deals with patients who may be hurt through knife crime, and I saw the work of Redthread, a social organisation that helps to turn young people away from a life in crime. It is an organisation we are supporting with more funding for early intervention, and I hope he welcomes that. As I say, I would be happy to meet him.
Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Since the tragic murder of 17-year-old Tavis Spencer-Aitkens in my constituency, I have been meeting local community groups to see what we can do to try to prevent young people from getting involved in gangs, gang violence and drug dealing. There is a move to glamorise this lifestyle through social media, so I hope the Secretary of State can imagine my horror at discovering, just over a week ago, that films are still available on social media—showing violence, drug taking, making money out of selling drugs and, indeed, abusing young women—starring members of the gangs who are themselves currently on trial for murder. What can the Secretary of State do? Does he agree with me that he needs to work with other members of the Cabinet right across Government, and that convening Cobra will enable that to happen? We cannot afford to have this sort of glamorisation of a gang lifestyle still available on social media.

Sajid Javid: I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the importance of this issue and the need to work across Government. He asked about social media and the way in which some parts of it glamorised violence. I, too, have seen some of the material to which he referred, and far too much is available on social media. Some of it is generated in the UK and some abroad, but it all glamorises this type of violence.

What are we doing about it? Last year, I funded a £1.4 million project on social media capability, run from London, to look at what can be done to try to tackle some of this material online, but we need to do much more. We need new powers to do that, which is why I am working with the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on a new online harms White Paper. The intention is to give the state more powers to tackle exactly what the hon. Gentleman was discussing.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: I call Jim Cunningham.

Mr Cunningham: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. You have been very tolerant. May I tell the Home Secretary that it was useful to meet the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service about a fortnight ago? I want to reinforce the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) made. We need more community police on the streets—there is no doubt about that—and they could do something about youth services, but 20,000-odd police officers have been cut over the past seven years, which is a very low base on which to build.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman, like other hon. Members, is right to raise the issue of resources. I have mentioned the increase in resources in this year’s policing settlement. When it comes to his local force in the west midlands, as I have said to his colleague, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), I am more than happy to meet the West Midlands force again. I visited them only last week—it is a force that I regularly visit—and I am always looking to see what more we can do.

Privatised Probation System

5.6 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice if he will make a statement on the future of the privatised probation system.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): I am pleased to be called to address this urgent question, and fully understand why the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) has raised it. As the House will be aware, we have been looking very carefully at the future of probation services, and this gives me the opportunity briefly to set out the Transforming Rehabilitation reforms, some of the challenges, and our response.

As the House will be aware, Transforming Rehabilitation was strongly influenced by a Labour pilot—the Peterborough pilot—which demonstrated that by bringing in non-state providers, concentrating on a cohort of short-sentence prisoners who had not previously been supervised and paying providers for reducing reoffending, it was possible to achieve significant improvements. Transforming Rehabilitation was a coalition Government commitment and built on those principles by contracting the private sector and others—in Durham Tees Valley, for example, that included the local authority—and undertaking to pay the providers if they were able to reduce reoffending. The contracts were left flexible to encourage innovation. This private model was applied only to low-risk offenders—high-risk offenders continued to be supervised in the usual way by the state. The new model has delivered in some ways, but as the National Audit Office has pointed out, it has not delivered in others.

There has been a reduction in the binary rate of reoffending, although there has been an increase in the separate frequency measure. Some 40,000 additional offenders are currently being supervised who were not supervised under the old system. Some innovation has come into the system, and it has saved the taxpayer money. Even though the hon. Gentleman would point out that through changes to the contracts, more money has gone in, we are forecast to spend significantly less than we originally anticipated—perhaps as much as £700 million less.

The programme was challenged by external factors, some of which were difficult to model and predict. For example, societal changes and different sentencing decisions by judges meant that the case load given to community rehabilitation companies shifted, and the accredited programmes that were allocated were fewer than expected. That meant that the income streams of those companies was less than anticipated. Broader issues such as drugs, housing and treatment programmes also made it difficult for providers to control all the factors in reoffending, which led to the companies losing significant sums of money. We have therefore taken a new approach that seeks to address all those problems.

We have just conducted a consultation and are carefully studying the responses. Our intention, first, is to remove the dependence in the new probation system on unpredictable case loads and to improve co-ordination with the national probation service. We are emphasising overall quality of service in future, not just the reoffending
rate. We will be ending the existing contracts two years early. We will be setting minimum conditions for offender supervision, and we have invested over £20 million in through-the-gate services. Our objective, while retaining the benefits of flexibility and innovation, is to create a much higher-quality probation service that focuses on good-quality delivery and protects the public.

Richard Burgon: The National Audit Office report on probation privatisation is another damning indictment of the current Transport Secretary. Once again the Conservatives’ part-privatisation of probation has been exposed as a dangerous experiment that left the public less safe and out of pocket. The NAO highlights a 22% increase in reoffending. Will the Minister now admit that this privatisation has put public safety at risk in a reckless pursuit of running justice for private profit?

The NAO says the Ministry of Justice will pay at least £467 million more to failing private probation companies than was originally required. Does the Minister believe that rewarding failure in that way is the best use of much-reduced Ministry of Justice resources? Despite such failings, the Conservatives are recklessly planning to sign new private probation contracts. Will the Minister halt the current tendering process to allow an independent review into whether probation should be returned to the public sector, or are they just ideologically driven?

Last month, Working Links, one of the largest probation providers, collapsed. Will the Minister explain the tendering process by which it was quietly handed to another private company? Will he guarantee that there will be no further staff losses under this new arrangement? Another private provider, Interserve, is in deep financial difficulties. Does the Minister have an emergency probation plan ready for if or when Interserve goes under?

Finally, private shareholders should be left in no doubt: Labour will return probation to the public sector. Will the Minister guarantee today that new probation contracts will include break clauses, so that a future Labour Government can put an end to this disastrous privatisation if his Government will not?

Rory Stewart: As you would anticipate, Mr Speaker, we do not feel that this is simply an ideological choice between the private and the public sector. There are things that we can learn from the private sector. There have been some significant improvements in the way that services are delivered and in IT. We must also remember that this is not just a question of the private sector. In certain areas, we are working with local authorities and the voluntary sector.

To address the specific challenges that the hon. Gentleman raised, he pointed out that the frequency rate of reoffending has gone up, but the binary rate of reoffending has in fact gone down through the course of these programmes. On the question of cost, it is true that more money has gone in, but it is still much less money than anticipated. Broadly speaking, we were anticipating that we would spend about £3 billion over the course of the contract. The companies committed to spend about £1.8 billion and the Government put in an additional £400 million. That still leaves us spending perhaps £700 million—something of that sort—less than we anticipated. So the public have spent less money than they expected to over the course of this programme.

The Kent, Surrey and Sussex Community Rehabilitation Company is a good provider and we are confident it can step in successfully, but we also have the national probation service working with it to ensure that it operates well in the Working Links areas.

On the broader issue that the hon. Gentleman raised about whether we have looked carefully at the lessons, we absolutely have. As I explained, we will make absolutely sure that we look very carefully at the consultation requirements and that anything we do in the future carefully learns those lessons, de-risks, focuses on quality, improves performance and protects the public.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): In the field of justice policy, as in the field of health policy, arguments are being reduced to a notion that if the public sector provides a service it is automatically better than if the private sector does so. That is completely irrelevant and just a lazy substitute for producing any real ideas on what can be done to improve rehabilitation. I am very attracted by the Department’s idea that we might replace prison sentences of six months and less, because prison tends to toughen up the inadequate and unpleasant people who get those short sentences and need to be punished. It is essential that we strengthen the effectiveness of our probation-based rehabilitation services alongside that. I welcome what the Minister has announced, but does he accept that we need more trials of what can be done in various parts of the country so that we can carry public confidence, if we change the sentencing system, that people can be punished, but punished in a way that might more effectively stop them committing more crimes against the public when they are released?

Rory Stewart: Absolutely. As my right hon. and learned Friend points out, if we are to reduce the number of people serving ineffective short prison sentences, we must improve the quality of community sentences. That means that we need better supervision of offenders, better sentence planning and more use of technology, including electronic monitoring. One of the key objectives of the reforms that we will be bringing into probation is to reassure not just the public but the sentencers that good community protection exists.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): In Scotland, the probation service role is carried out by criminal justice social workers, who are part of local authorities’ social work departments—in other words, it is a public service, and I believe that that is as it should be. Effective reintegration and rehabilitation of offenders is at the heart of the Scottish system—rather than profit and hitting targets—and lately in Scotland, of course, we have had great success with getting rid of short-term sentences, which has led to a fall in the rate of reoffending. Does the Minister accept that probation should never be run for private profit and that reunifying the probation service under public control is the only way to properly protect the public across England and Wales?

Finally, this fiasco is part of a long list of scandalous wastes of public money for which the Minister’s colleague the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), has been responsible in his roles as Secretary of State for Justice and Secretary of State for Transport. This is one of two such scandals that have come to light over the weekend. We are hearing rumours that he is
not coming to the House later today to answer the urgent question about the ferry tendering disaster, so I ask the Minister, for whom I have the greatest respect—I realise that none of this is his fault—to tell us when the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell is going to be held to account for his shocking irresponsibility with taxpayers’ money.

Rory Stewart: As hon. Members would expect me to say, these things have more nuances and complexities. The basic idea that it is impossible for anybody except the Government to deliver good probation services was disproved, in fact, by the Labour pilot—the Peterborough pilot—which by bringing in the voluntary sector and social investors was able to reduce reoffending by a staggering 9%, particularly by providing something that we are developing at the moment and that does not fully exist yet in Scotland: a fully integrated through-the-gate service linking the prison officer in the prison with probation in the community. We need to take into account that this is not a binary choice.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I am very slightly disappointed that my hon. Friend referred only to the Peterborough pilot, which we inherited when my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) and I arrived in the Ministry of Justice in 2010. By the time that we were moved from the Ministry of Justice—for me, that was to spend more time with the Kaleidoscope Trust and with you, Mr Speaker—we had at least 20 different pilots, putting responsibility for the rehabilitation of offenders on the probation service in Wales and Staffordshire, three police services, three local authorities and eight health authorities dealing with issues such as drug addiction. We were waiting to see what was going to work best when all these pilots were swept away and the probation service was broken up. Will the Minister look at trying to make the system more coherent by establishing a link between the probation service and police and crime commissioners in the community to make the justice system rather better joined up across the community?

Rory Stewart: First, I pay tribute to my hon. and gallant Friend for the work he did on piloting many of these ideas. We can learn a great deal from those pilots. Central to our reforms will have to be co-ordination—having the right relationship between the national probation service and the community rehabilitation companies, and thinking about the geography—and part of that will be thinking about how the CRCs work with the police and crime commissioners.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I know that the Minister has done a lot of work on brain injury in prisons. Is it not vital, where prisoners with a brain injury have started some form of rehabilitation in prison and have been receiving advice and support, that that is carried through into their experience in the outside world? Otherwise, there is a strong likelihood that they will simply go back inside.

Rory Stewart: First, I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for the work he has done on acquired brain injury. As the House will be aware, he has argued very strongly that brain injury frequently suffered as early as childhood can have a long-lasting effect, particularly on behaviour, and contribute to reoffending. The major question is about getting the right relationship with the NHS. The Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), is leading some interesting work, drawing on some of the extra funding now available to the NHS, to make sure we have the right programmes in the community, not just on acquired brain injury but on everything stretching from mental health issues to addiction services provided by the local authority.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Does the Minister agree that, although CRCs need to improve and perform better, we need to focus on reducing the rate of reoffending, which is what we are seeing, and not on ideological concerns about how a service is provided?

Rory Stewart: That is absolutely right. The key thing is learning what works and how to do it in a way that works for the Government budget. We are increasingly learning that although it is about treatment programmes, it is also about housing, getting people into employment and dealing with addiction issues. Getting all of this properly integrated from within the prison out into the community will be the key. That is how we will protect the public.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The problems with Transforming Rehabilitation were entirely predicted in 2014, so the NAO report should come as no surprise to Ministers.

I want to ask the Minister about women. There is a great deal of evidence that many CRCs are not offering good-quality tailored provision to women. As he and his ministerial colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), know, women’s centres do a much better job. Will he now consider removing women wholly from the remit of the CRCs and making full use of the provision in women’s centres to address the causes of their offending behaviour?

Rory Stewart: That is a very interesting proposal. The London CRC attempted to do it by setting up a programme designed for women entirely separate from the male programme. There were challenges, however, that were then criticised by the independent inspector of probation. I am happy to sit down with the hon. Lady and talk through some of the complexities of doing that.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: No less celebrated a denizen of the House than the Chair of the Justice Select Committee is among our number. We are deeply appreciative of that fact. Let us hear him.

Robert Neill: I am very grateful, Mr Speaker.

I welcome the Minister’s frank and honest response to the findings of this report, which, as he knows, mirror almost entirely the conclusions of the Select Committee’s report last June. As well as confirming, as I am sure he will, that the Government accept the three principal recommendations in paragraph 21 of the NAO report, will he reflect particularly on the division between CRCs and the national probation service in two respects? First, the division by categorisation of risk has been
much criticised, because risk levels vary and change during the process of supervision and the current categorisation does not reflect that. Secondly, the separation and distancing of the CRCs, which deliver the programmes, from the sentencers in court has undoubtedly undermined sentencer confidence in community sentences and alternatives to custody.

Rory Stewart: Of the two arguments, I think that the second is the stronger. The fact that CRCs are not involved in the pre-sentence reports, in particular, is a real issue. Shifting case loads is also an issue. We have seen a 48% variation in case loads, with more focus on serious crime, and we need a way of responding to that, such as better integration between the NPS and CRCs.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The reckless fragmentation of the probation service back in 2014 has predictably led to this sorry end. I appreciate what the Minister is saying—it did not happen on his watch, and he has been put there to put it right—but I want to reinforce what was said by the Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill): what we need is a coherent system with no gaps through which people can fall. Will he achieve that?

Rory Stewart: I absolutely agree. I could not have put it better. That is exactly what we are trying to achieve; that is exactly what the consultation is about; and its delivery is exactly what I expect people to judge me on over the next few months.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): The Minister has engaged fully with the Justice Committee’s report, which our Chair mentioned a moment ago, but I should be grateful for further clarification of what he intends to do about the increasing number of people who are recalled to prison. Specifically, I should like to know whether a way can be found to monitor that number. Transforming Rehabilitation increased the number of people who were included in work on reoffending, so it is difficult to establish whether or not the number of those recalled is in fact increasing.

Rory Stewart: One of the key measures in Transforming Rehabilitation was the supervision of 40,000 people who had not previously been supervised and whose sentences were shorter than 12 months. Previously, we had no idea what they were doing, because they were not being supervised by any probation officer. By supervising those 40,000 people—they tend to be a cohort of prolific reoffenders—we end up with many more recalls than happened previously. The answer must be to consider on a case-by-case basis whether the recalls are justified, but we must also acknowledge that it is a good thing to supervise 40,000 more people. When they were not supervised, the public were more endangered.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Speaking to school students in Twickenham on Friday, and subsequently giving a talk at Royal Holloway College, London University, in Egham, I referenced the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner), not least for his tendency to yell “Shocking!” “It’s a disgrace,” or, alternatively, “Be’ave!” at the Treasury Bench. I think that the hon. Gentleman’s profile is now substantially higher at both those institutions, and I am sure that, if they are listening, they will listen to him with great interest.

Karl Turner: This situation is indeed shocking. [Laughter.] I do wonder: either very senior civil servants follow the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) around giving him really bad advice, or he is in fact just incredibly incompetent. Which is it?

Rory Stewart: I look at this very seriously.

Karl Turner: It is very serious.

Rory Stewart: Yes, it is. Big lessons need to be drawn from it, not just for the purpose of probation reforms but for the purpose of any other reforms that we make in government. One of the big issues concerned is our ability to predict the consequences of large-scale system change, and in particular to predict the shifts in caseload. As the National Audit Office points out, there was a modelling of a 2% shift, and the reality was a 48% shift. Drilling down into how that advice was given and responded to is one of the ways in which we can draw those lessons.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): In Chelmsford, we have a very busy prison and people want to know that when people leave prison they do not reoffend. Can the Minister confirm that although some people have gone on to reoffend more, the number of people reoffending has reduced?

Rory Stewart: First, may I pay tribute as always to my hon. Friend, who has been a real supporter of the probation service? I have been in regular contact with him, and I am sure that, if they are listening, they will listen to him with great interest.

First, wherever we go with this new system, we will have a much more integrated system: it will continue to be a mixed market, but it will be a much more integrated system. Secondly, whatever we do now will involve some transition costs and risks, and we do not want to minimise what they will be, but we have learned the lessons and the most important one is that, instead of focusing on just paying people in terms of reducing reoffending, we will pay people for the overall quality of the services they deliver.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): The Minister will probably be aware that the former Home Secretary Charles Clarke very much wanted tendering for probation to be, as he described it, the norm. Why does the Minister think there has been a sudden change among some Members in the Chamber today?
Rory Stewart: That is a good reminder. The former Home Secretary Charles Clarke and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) are articulating, but at the same point, which is that there is an enormous amount that non-Government actors—not just the private sector, but the voluntary sector—can bring in terms of innovation, efficiency and delivering very good services.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Volumes for offences were 48% lower than expected; community rehabilitation companies had losses of £294 million when they were expected to have profits of £269 million; and the figures relating to the reoffending of individuals were 22% up; who signed off these projections and who is accountable for this delivery failure?

Rory Stewart: These questions of accountability are quite difficult for me to answer. Normally, I answer by offering to resign; I am not about to do that again, but I would say that these things are related. On the question the right hon. Gentleman raised about the caseload shift, it is a 2% case load shift which was the same question we asked in 2014, so will the task of rehabilitation can be helped enormously by looking at the experience in Denmark and Germany, where prisoners are encouraged at an early stage to prepare and take work that provides valuable training?

Rory Stewart: Yes, we can learn a great deal from Germany and Denmark, and indeed in some of our most successful prisons, as prisoners develop in their sentence—as they develop more skills—they are given opportunities to cook for themselves and look after themselves, and of course through the use of release on temporary licence, we can get prisoners into work while they are still in prison. This means, when they leave, they are more likely to have a job. One of the key things about reducing reoffending is making sure there is not a cliff edge at the prison door, but that for at least 10 weeks before people leave a lot of preparation goes into setting up the life they will have outside prison.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I genuinely have sympathy for the Minister: he is the man with the shovel and brush following a horse that has been ridden by his colleague the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling). We have seen an award-winning public probation service turned into an unmitigated disaster and, critically, it is not reducing reoffending. Given the indictment of the service by the National Audit Office report, is it not now time to call a halt to this privatisation experiment, return the service to the public sector and resource it properly so that it can really bring about the genuine rehabilitation of prisoners and others?

Rory Stewart: We will look very carefully at the contracts. Along with the issues that we will be examining, there is the issue of break clauses, but there are other issues, too. One issue that we have learned from is what happens in procurement legislation to allow us to put more money into a service if something unpredictable such as the caseload shift happens and what it takes to bring it back into the public sector. Contracts are the key to this.

Suella Braverman ( Fareham) (Con): I hope that my hon. Friend does not resign, because he is doing a very good job in his post and I hope that he continues to do so. Dickson House is a probation service bail hostel in Fareham, which I have visited. The team there delivers a vital service in supporting former serious offenders and integrating them back into the community. Does my hon. Friend agree that work such as that being done at Dickson House is helping to improve reoffending rates and keep our citizens safe?

Rory Stewart: It is great to have an opportunity to pay tribute to the work of our probation hostels. Some of the people who work in them are incredibly dedicated public servants, and they often have to work with very challenged individuals. They often have enormous success in changing lives and protecting the public.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I have three prisons in my constituency, and it is really tragic to see what has happened to the probation service in recent years. It is now fragmented and under-resourced, and, critically, it is not reducing reoffending. Given the indictment of the service by the National Audit Office report, is it not now time to call a halt to this privatisation experiment, return the service to the public sector and resource it properly so that it can really bring about the genuine rehabilitation of prisoners and others?

Rory Stewart: I absolutely agree that we need to resource the service properly, and I absolutely agree that we need to focus on this mixed market on getting the quality of delivery, but respectfully, I disagree with the idea that the answer is simply to bring it back into the public sector. I think it needs to be a mixed market, but it needs to be a mixed market that is unified and that really focuses on reducing reoffending.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The longer a prisoner serves in jail, the less likely he or she is to reoffend. That is simply a fact. If, under the this new system, repeat prolific offenders are more likely to reoffend—which is what the Minister has just said—why are those repeat prolific offenders being released early from their sentences in the first place?

Rory Stewart: There is an issue here of correlation and causation. It is true that people who serve 40 or 50-year sentences are less likely to reoffend, for two reasons. The first relates to the offence type. For example, murderers are generally less likely to reoffend than shoplifters. Secondly, the mere fact that they are locked away for 40 or 50 years makes it difficult for them to reoffend. Generally, short-sentence prisoners who are in for under 12 months are overwhelmingly dominated by chaotic individuals who often have drug or alcohol problems and who often commit offences such as
shoplifting. They are a much more difficult target group to deal with than the people who are locked away for 40 or 50 years.

**Mr Khalid Mahmood** (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): After the failure of Working Links and in the light of the National Audit Office’s damning report into the implementation of Transforming Rehabilitation the first time round by the former Secretary of State—who was then promoted to the Department for Transport, proving that Conservative rehabilitation does not work—as well as continual criticism by Her Majesty’s inspectorate of prisons proving that the mixed system is not beneficial to the taxpayer, why is the Minister continuing with the TR2 programme?

**Rory Stewart**: The first thing is to absolutely reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are looking very carefully at the responses to the consultation and listening carefully to what is being said around the House. Our response will address many of his fundamental concerns. We should see a better resourced, more unified and high-quality probation system at the end of this.

**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): The Minister’s reply seemed to mention a £700 million underspend in the system. Will he redirect just a small part of that to Care after Combat, whose work in prisons is working and is reducing reoffending?

**Rory Stewart**: I pay tribute to Care after Combat’s work, and the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), and I have met the organisation on several occasions. Unfortunately, as my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) will know, when we have a £700 million underspend in the Department, that does not necessarily mean that we have £700 million available to spend on anything we like.

**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Following the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner), is not the real lesson from all this that the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) should not be allowed anywhere near any large-scale, transformative Government projects or, indeed, near any projects, as the House will hear during the next urgent question?

**Rory Stewart**: No. Respectfully, that is not the fundamental lesson here. The lesson is that reducing reoffending is very complicated. The reoffending rate has been static across the developed world for nearly 50 years, and addressing that involves changing the lives of some of the most challenged individuals in society, dealing with their housing, their education and their early childhoods. Fundamentally, we need to be serious about the scale of the task.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I rise as the co-chair of the justice unions parliamentary group. Friday’s NAO report identifies an inherent risk that offender managers may avoid breaching offenders when that would affect CRC performance against contract targets, and that is the unacceptable face of the profit motive undermining justice for victims and communities. Given that the Justice Secretary has admitted as much and with probation in Wales set to come back into public management by the end of this year, what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that the future Wales probation model is properly resourced to succeed?

**Rory Stewart**: I am glad that the hon. Lady welcomes the decision in Wales, where it was right to bring things under a single, state-run probation system. I know that she has had the opportunity to meet Amy Rees, who is now the executive director of both prisons and probation in Wales. We will be putting in extra resources; but above all, we are relying on the fact that bringing the two things together will deliver significant efficiencies, and if we can get the through-the-gate investment right, I think the hon. Lady will be pleasantly surprised.

**Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): My constituent Sam Cook was stabbed to death last year. His killer was on licence having been released after being convicted of a similar knife offence, but the probation officer did not know how to use the IT system, so the monitoring of the killer was not appropriate to the concerns of the probation service. I have no idea how that could possibly happen, and I am sure that the Minister is the same. Will he therefore tell us what processes are in place to ensure that processes are properly carried out, that every member of staff is trained to use the system and that we never again see another young man like Sam Cook killed due to inadequate supervision?

**Rory Stewart**: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for raising that tragic case, and I am happy to sit down with him and, indeed, the family to talk through the details. The way that we learn the lessons of every serious further offence—this happens in about 0.1% of the cases that we supervise under probation—is to conduct a comprehensive SFO review, and those lessons may be about IT, training, support or how a probation manager raises a matter with a senior probation officer. We are happy to sit down with the hon. Gentleman and the family to learn the lessons from that case and ensure that it does not happen again.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his responses. Some 69% of females in the judicial system have mental health problems, so how will the current probationary regulations take that disturbing figure into consideration and address it in the privatised probation system?

**Rory Stewart**: I am pleased to have my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care alongside me on the Treasury Bench at this point, because the question of addressing mental health needs goes to the core of the kind of collaboration that we have with the national health service. In the end, our offenders are among the biggest public health risks in the country. Their average life expectancy is 50; their suicide rate is seven times the national average; and as the hon. Gentleman says, their addiction and mental health condition rates are far higher than those of anyone else. We are working closely with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, because getting things right will be good for society and for individuals and, ultimately, will protect the public.
Eurotunnel: Payment

5.45 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Transport to make a statement on the payment of £33 million to Eurotunnel over no-deal ferry contracts.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): I would like to update the House on the settlement that the Government have reached with Eurotunnel, which will help to deliver the unhindered supply of vital medicines and medical devices in the case of a no-deal Brexit.

The best way to ensure a smooth and orderly exit from the EU, both for the NHS and for the wider economy, is to support the deal that the Attorney General is currently finalising. Anyone in this House who cares about the unhindered supply of medicines should vote for that deal, but leaving the EU without a deal remains the default position under the law, and it is incumbent on us to keep people safe. It is therefore vital that adequate contingency measures are in place for any Brexit scenario.

Preparing for a no-deal exit has required significant effort from the NHS, the pharmaceutical industry and the whole medical supply chain, and I pay tribute to their work and thank them for their efforts on these contingency measures. The settlement struck between the Government and Eurotunnel last week is an important part of these measures. Because of the legal action taken by Eurotunnel and the legal risks of the court case, it became clear that, without this settlement, we could no longer be confident of the unhindered supply of medicines. Without this settlement, the ferry capacity needed to be confident of supply was at risk. As a Government, we could not take that risk, and I doubt anyone in this House would have accepted that risk, either. With this settlement we can be confident, as long as everyone does what they need to do, that supply will continue unhindered. Under the settlement, Eurotunnel has to spend the money on improving resilience, security and traffic flow at the border, benefiting both passengers and business.

The Department for Transport, on behalf of the whole Government, entered into these contracts in good faith. Our duty is to keep people safe, whatever complications are thrown up. Although we continue to plan for all eventualities, it is clear that the best way to reduce all these risks is to vote for the deal in the days to come.

Andy McDonald: Once again, the Transport Secretary is not in his place to answer a question directed to him. His disregard for taxpayers and this House is clear. On Friday he reached a £33 million out-of-court settlement with Eurotunnel to provide services in the event of a no-deal Brexit because the Government were going to lose the case.

The Transport Secretary’s decision to bypass procurement processes in awarding a contract to Seaborne Freight, a ferry company without any ships, breached public procurement rules, and Eurotunnel had the Government over a barrel. Will the Minister now detail the total cost to taxpayers of this decision, including legal costs? How much money will be paid up front?

Eurotunnel will seemingly make Brexit-related improvements at Folkestone. Can the Minister say exactly what sort of agreement the Government have with Eurotunnel? What makes him think that this contract with Eurotunnel will not be challenged on anti-competition grounds? A former Department for Transport adviser said:

“there is a risk it could be construed as another piece of public procurement without open and transparent competition.”

That would risk further legal action and yet more public money being squandered.

Even in this golden age of ministerial incompetence, the Transport Secretary stands out from the crowd. He leaves a trail of destruction in his wake, causing chaos and wasting billions of pounds, yet he shows no contrition, no acknowledgment of his mistakes and no resolve to learn and improve. He is now ridiculed in The New York Times. The mayor of Calais has banned him from his town. The Transport Secretary has become an international embarrassment. The Prime Minister is the only person in the country who retains confidence in this failing Transport Secretary, and she does so only because of her own political weakness. The public deserve to know how many more billions of pounds will she allow him to waste before saying, “Enough is enough”?

This country cannot afford this Transport Secretary. He should be sacked without delay.

Matt Hancock: In listening to that, I notice that the hon. Gentleman did not disagree with the decision we made on Friday. That decision was to ensure that we have the ferry capacity in place so that whatever happens in the Brexit scenario we can have the unhindered supply of medicines. That is the duty of this Government and that is why the whole Government came to this decision. He asked some specific questions, which I answered in my statement. However, let me reiterate: this is a legal settlement with Eurotunnel; the maximum cost is £33 million, as was set out clearly on Friday; and the purpose of the decision is to ensure that unhindered flow of medicines. So, as I said in my statement, the purpose of this is to make sure that whatever happens in Brexit people can be safe. I was happy to support that decision, which everybody in this House would have made in the same circumstances.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Many of my constituents are concerned about the supply of medicines after Brexit. What reassurance can the Secretary of State give me that the supply of medicines to harder-to-reach places such as Scotland will continue after we leave the European Union?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to ask about the unhindered supply of medicines. The first thing he can do to ensure that that supply continues, with no risks to it, is to support the deal in the meaningful vote, as he has done before. Secondly, we are working with all parts of the country and with the devolved authorities on this. Although ensuring that we have these supply chains in place in any Brexit scenario is a UK Government matter, we are working with the devolved Administrations, especially to ensure that the flow reaches all parts of the country.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I wish to echo the question: where is the £2.7 billion man? I have asked him to step aside several times, I have
challenged the Prime Minister to sack him and now he has his own social media hashtag—FailingGrayling. Surely now is the time he has to go.

Apparently, we hear that this is not compensation for Eurotunnel but a contract for vital services. If they were so vital, why did it take Eurotunnel going to court to get a contract? Why was Eurotunnel overlooked in the first place? The secrecy on this is a real concern. How much documentation is still hidden away from public view? If the no-deal contract is not invoked, how much money will still be paid to Eurotunnel? Why on earth would the Health Secretary entrust the transportation of life-saving medicines to the Transport Secretary?

Bechtel is set to sue the Government over the HS2 tender process. What other departmental procurement risks still exist? After his efforts at the Ministry of Justice cost us £600 million, the Transport Secretary has allowed Virgin Trains East Coast to walk away owing £2 billion; he has blamed Network Rail for mishaps when he is in charge of the organisation; and he has culpability for Southern rail, for the £38 million Northern rail timetable fiasco and for the £800,000 ferry due diligence contract, where due diligence was not carried out on the company with no ships. He has tried to argue that the Seaborne fiasco has not cost the taxpayer any money. Only for this Transport Secretary can this £33 million be just the tip of a financial iceberg. What does it take for him to be sacked—or to do the decent thing and walk away?

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): There is something quite wrong here. I have been in the House for quite a few years—usually people say, “Too long,” but I have been here a long time. This almost seems to be an abuse of the House. The fact is that the Opposition asked for an urgent question on the Eurotunnel payment of £33 million. I do not know what £33 million means in Suffolk, but in Huddersfield it would make a hell of a difference in regenerating our local economy. I am not calling for Eurotunnel’s resignation because he is a symptom of something deeply wrong with this Government. They are totally incapable of arranging their policies ready for Brexit. That is the truth of the matter. There is total chaos on the Government Benches because they had not predicted what was going to happen with Brexit, and they are showing no ability to cope with post-Brexit conditions, what is happening in the Eurotunnel and so on.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), what I did not hear in the hon. Gentleman’s question was a statement about whether he supports the decision or not. I think that is because he does support the decision to ensure we have what we need to get the unhindered supply of medicines. More than that, he and his Scottish National party friends complain endlessly about a no-deal Brexit, yet they do not do what is needed to avoid a no-deal Brexit, which is to vote for the deal.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): It is always a pleasure to see my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, although rather a surprising one on this occasion. The usual reason for settling an action is to minimise your losses when you are obviously on a loser in defending it, but I am relieved to hear that this was done in order to ensure the safety of medicines. As we are on that subject, can he give me some reassurance about the long-term future for the regulation and approval of medicines in this country? If and when we leave the EU—we look as though we are bound to do so—we of course leave the European Medicines Agency, which is leaving this country, and I am not clear what our long-term arrangements will be. Are we going to seek some association with the EMA system, or will we be setting up a totally new British system to replace it? Can he guarantee continuity of the proper regulation of medicines while that process is under way?

Matt Hancock: The short answer to that is yes. The medium length answer is that we will ensure that medicines can be licensed in this country with no further burdens than under the EMA system by matching some of the EMA processes, but in a no-deal scenario we would also be looking to introduce our own processes so that some medicines could be brought and licensed here before they could be licensed in Europe. Indeed, changes to this area is one of the examples of advantages from Brexit, which I am sure my right hon. and learned Friend will be delighted to hear about, because they mean that we can grasp some of the opportunities that the future of medicines presents. The long answer is so long that I will be happy to write to him with full details and place a copy of the letter in the Library of the House.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s sensible contingency planning for any eventuality, but may I highlight that it is important to focus on all the routes across the channel and everything related to that? Although it is good that Eurotunnel is being focused on, it is worth looking at the transit system as a way to smooth the procedures on the main ferry routes across the channel also.

Matt Hancock: Yes, and that is exactly what these contracts, with which we can now proceed because of the settlement, do. Essentially, they provide for more capacity away from Dover-Calais so that medicines can be routed into the UK and, indeed, onwards to Ireland through other routes. They allow for that. I am glad of my hon. Friend’s interest in this matter and hope he will vote for the deal.
Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The Secretary of State for Transport may have ducked today’s questions, but I am pretty sure that my Committee will still require his answers. If there is a Brexit deal or, indeed, if there is no Brexit, how much of our taxpayers’ £33 million do the Government expect to recover from Eurotunnel?

Matt Hancock: Of course, the medicines are going on these boats that we are procuring and that makes this a serious health matter. The hon. Lady is perfectly within her rights to ask these sorts of questions. The truth is that the £33 million is the maximum figure. It may not be as high as that, but we have been clear about the full exposure.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): If we can essay a transport-related question, could my right hon. Friend give me some assurance that the extremely important cross-channel rail link will continue as it is now, under any circumstances, after 29 March? On the medical front, can he say what steps his Department has taken on radioisotopes and particularly important medicines? I have constituents who are very concerned about that.

Matt Hancock: Of course, we very much hope that the train will also continue to operate as now and we have received such assurances. When it comes to radioisotopes, we have also procured flights and aircraft capacity to ensure that those goods and those parts of the medical supply chain that need to be brought in faster and cannot be stockpiled can also be brought through.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Can the Secretary of State tell us precisely how much of the £33 million is the maximum figure? It may not be as high as that, but we have been clear about the full exposure.

Matt Hancock: This was a cross-Government decision. It is all taxpayers’ money, at the end of the day.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): It is important that people with long-term health conditions are reassured that they will have access to the right medicines, so my right hon. Friend is right to make sure that there is proper access across the channel. What are the pharmaceutical companies doing to keep a greater stock of reserves over and above those that they usually hold?

Matt Hancock: We have a multifaceted approach to making sure that we have an unhindered supply of medicines, and stockpiling is of course another important part of that. The vast majority of the 12,300 medicines that are commonly used in England can be stockpiled. For those that can be stockpiled, we asked for a six-week stockpile to be put in place, and we have plans in place for almost all of those. For the very small number remaining, we are putting plans in place right now. We are doing all that with the confidence that by the time we get to 29 March, so long as everybody does what they need to do between now and then, we will be able to have confidence in that unhindered supply.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Secretary of State is making the mistake of insulting the intelligence of those of us who have been pursuing this issue for the past two months. What happened on Friday was nothing to do with the unhindered supply of medicines: it was an out-of-court settlement to avoid the British Government’s being found in breach of the law of competitive tendering. Will the Secretary of State confirm that even in the event of a deal, not a penny of that £33 million will be recoverable, because it is not for a contract but for an out-of-court settlement to avoid a finding that his Government were in breach of the law?

Matt Hancock: On the contrary: this is all about the unhindered supply of medicines, because that is what we will be doing with the boats.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I do not know when you last travelled through the channel tunnel, Mr Speaker, but when I came back on Saturday 5 January there was complete chaos at Calais, with miles of queues and hours of delays, so I am glad that Eurotunnel is going to improve its investment in our borders and security. Will the Secretary of State confirm that if the money is not spent on improving our borders and security, it will be paid back to the taxpayer?

Matt Hancock: I can go even further than that: it will not be paid over unless it is being spent on security, resilience and other measures, so we will get some of the improvements that my hon. Friend seeks.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): With all due respect to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, surely the House and the taxpayer are entitled to hear today what the main mistake made by the Secretary of State for Transport was that has resulted in this unnecessary pay-out of £33 million. Where does this latest shambles rate in the Secretary of State for Transport’s top 10 catalogue of ministerial mishaps?

Matt Hancock: Frankly, I do not think we should really pay much heed to such a statement, rather than a question, unless the hon. Gentleman is going to vote for the deal as well.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is always a bonus to see my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care at the Dispatch Box answering questions, particularly today. On the deal and making sure that we have a secure supply of medicine, will he reassure me that he will continue to ignore some of the noise and party political point scoring and focus on making sure that the NHS can function in whatever circumstances it faces after 29 March?

Matt Hancock: There is a notable difference in tone, is there not, between those who care about ensuring that people get the supply of medicines in future, and those who want to make political points out of it but do not oppose the decision we are discussing.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I find this utterly extraordinary, because in the Public Accounts Committee hearing on this matter, the permanent secretary said:

“I am confident that our process was lawful, and obviously the Department and I acted on legal advice in determining how to take that process forward.”
If we were so confident in that legal advice, why was this settlement reached at all? Actually, is this not an admission of a catastrophic failure in stakeholder management?

**Matt Hancock:** No. It is clear that we needed to ensure that there were no risks around the two contracts for the capacity that we need to bring in an unhindered supply of medicines, whatever the Brexit scenario. I do not know whether the hon. Lady thinks it would have been worth bearing the risk of a court case, which may well have struck down the capacity to make sure that people who have serious and life-threatening conditions can get the medicines that they want. She implied that she was against such assurances, and I think that would have been a mistake.

**Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con):** I support the withdrawal agreement—it is a good deal—but I also support our being ready for no-deal eventualities. I was reassured by the Secretary of State’s answer to the question from my hon. Friend for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) about stockpiling medicines that can be stockpiled, but for those that cannot be stockpiled, what action is the Secretary of State taking to be sure that they can be air-freighted rather than have to come through the tunnel?

**Matt Hancock:** My hon. Friend is quite right to support a deal and the action that we have taken in case there is no deal. That is the position that anybody who cares about the unhindered supply of medicines should take. When it comes to those medicines that cannot be stockpiled, we have contracts for flights to ensure that those medicines can be flown in. We have in place a flight from Birmingham to Maastricht, and the return journey, obviously, to ensure that we can get those short-term medicines in.

**Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab):** This must be making parliamentary history this afternoon. We have two urgent questions about the same incompetent Minister causing mayhem and chaos in two different Departments and he does not even have the face to come here and front it out—and we are left with Hancock’s half hour! Let me ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care: is any of the £33 million going to be reimbursed from his budget to the Department for Transport?

**Matt Hancock:** This was, of course, a cross-Government decision, which is why I am here. It is the medicines that will be using that capacity. In the Hancock family, we are very proud of “Hancock’s Half Hour”, and we thought that Tony was a very funny man.

**Mr Speaker:** It is worth pointing out that that Hancock was deliberately funny.

**John Howell (Henley) (Con):** The Secretary of State has talked about medicines, but there are also prescribed foods—for example, the gluten-free food on which some people depend. What will the situation be for those foods?

**Matt Hancock:** Of course that matters enormously, too. Although medicines are the category 1 prioritised goods that will be using the extra procured capacity safeguarded by this settlement, there are other measures being undertaken by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to protect the supply of foods.

**Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab):** That £33 million would pay the annual salary of 118,000 nurses, and God knows we need them. The NHS has 40,000 nursing vacancies in the NHS in England. Does the Secretary of State for Health think that the cost of the latest blunder of the elusive Secretary of State for Transport is money well spent?

**Matt Hancock:** Well, I do think that it is very important that we spend what is necessary in order to have the unhindered supply of medicines. The hon. Lady shakes her head, but would she, in these shoes, put at risk the unhindered supply of medicines? Of course she would not, so she must agree with me that this was the right decision to take.

**Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con):** My right hon. Friend has dealt with the channel aspect, but one of my constituents, Jeff Screeton, has a small business that specialises in small-scale freight on domestic passenger rail services. That includes medical items, particularly items that need to move quickly. Might he be interested in this work, particularly from the domestic transportation side of this contingency planning?

**Matt Hancock:** Yes, I would be very happy to talk to my hon. Friend about that business.

**Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab):** This expenditure is only necessary because of the sheer incompetence of the Secretary of State for Transport. I have sat and listened to him in this Chamber and listened to him in the Transport Committee, and after every fiasco his defence is that it has not cost the Exchequer any money. The fact is that this has cost the Exchequer £33 million. Has he not run out of runway and should he not resign?

**Matt Hancock:** No, the decision to settle this case in order to provide for the unhindered supply of medicines, which I am sure that, like me, the hon. Gentleman, agrees is important, was the correct judgment and the correct decision, because we need to make sure that we keep people safe.

**Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con):** Although it can never be comfortable to give a settlement to any organisation, I have to agree with the Father of the House, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), that it is better to draw a line under this and move on. The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) is chuntering. I shall have to defer to her knowledge of losing cases in the legal courts. Can the Secretary of State tell me whether it is correct that Eurotunnel has said it will use this money to provide increased resilience at the Dover port?

**Matt Hancock:** Yes, my hon. Friend. Friend is correct. He makes a broader point: people watching these proceedings, people who have serious illnesses, and people who rely on medicines every day to keep them alive will be amazed by those Members who will not vote for the deal and therefore make a no-deal exit more likely, and by those Members who just cause political noise rather...
than admitting that, in the circumstances, they too would have settled this case. We are hearing a lot of that from those on the Opposition Benches. On the Government Benches, however, we are hearing from Members who care deeply about making sure that people get the medicines that they need.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Does the £33 million include all the possible expenditure under this agreement, or are there any additional costs, such as legal fees, that need to be added on top? If there are, how much are they?

Matt Hancock: The settlement is £33 million. Of course, there are lawyers, and legal time was also needed inside the Department. That happens all the time in order to try to make sure that we can keep people safe, which is the whole purpose of this exercise.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The reality is that the Secretary of State is engaged in deflection. We are now in a situation where this country risks running out of vital medicines for each and every one of our constituents because of this Government’s relentless pursuit of a no-deal hard Brexit that will ruin this country. Is it not the case that this money that we are having to pay out is emblematic of the chaos in this Government and the incompetence of this Government and that our constituents will go without medicine because they cannot get their act together?

Matt Hancock: If the hon. Lady really, really believes what she just said, it is incumbent on her to vote for the deal.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): The Health Secretary really is taking one for the team in this urgent transport question. Incidentally, where is the Transport Secretary?

Matt Hancock: The Transport Secretary is working hard on making sure that we can improve the transport system.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): And the Secretary of State almost said that with a straight face. What went wrong and who is taking responsibility for it?

Matt Hancock: This is a cross-Government decision. The purpose of this settlement was to ensure the unhindered supply of medicines. I am the Health Secretary and it is my job to do everything that I can, in all circumstances, to ensure that there is that availability of medicines. I am sure that, whatever the Brexit scenario, the hon. Gentleman’s constituents who need medicines would rather that we made this settlement to ensure that we have the confidence that we can deliver that.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I have recently been to see the Secretary of State for Education to lobby him for desperately needed resources to rebuild schools in my constituency and I was told that there is no money. Can the Secretary of State tell me how incompetent I need to be to walk away with £33 million for my constituents?

Matt Hancock: I am sure that the hon. Lady’s constituents will need to be confident that there is medicine for them, whatever the scenario is under Brexit, and that is what this settlement is all about.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): Is the Minister aware of the number of healthcare companies that are reluctantly extending their bank credit so that they can stockpile goods and components because of the lack of forward planning by this Government? What can he do to help those companies and also to help the banks that have to lend on longer terms than they normally would have an appetite for?

Matt Hancock: I mentioned in my statement that the pharmaceutical industry has stepped up to the plate and acted extremely responsibly in order to put in place the stockpiling that is necessary for a contingency in the event of a no-deal Brexit. All of us in this House can do something about the potential of a no-deal Brexit: we can vote for the deal.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I know that the Health Secretary dreams of being Prime Minister, but to his great surprise, and to ours, he woke up as the Transport Secretary’s fall guy this morning. Trying to explain to constituents what is happening in this place is really hard. Trying to explain why a Transport Secretary has not been fired or has not resigned for effectively taking a decision that has lost the taxpayer £33 million is really difficult. Why is it that the Health Secretary cannot get up and simply apologise for the Transport Secretary’s error here? It would go such a long way to restoring confidence in politics. At the moment, this shows Parliament and the Government at their very, very worst.

Matt Hancock: I think I have mentioned that the point of this settlement was to ensure the unhindered supply of medicines, which is very much a matter for me as Health Secretary. People watching these proceedings will also be astonished that the Labour party can argue against a settlement such as this when it is refusing to vote for the deal that could ensure that we have a smooth and orderly exit and that the plans and the contingency plans for a no-deal Brexit are not necessary. Mr Speaker, the hon. Gentleman should vote for the deal, too.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I do not know what is more embarrassing: that the Secretary of State has the brass neck to sit there this afternoon, or that his entire Front-Bench team are nodding along with his “Jackanory” stories.

Since the Secretary of State insists that this is about the supply of medicines, I am going to ask him, for the second time in a fortnight, about radioisotopes. Last time he said that there was no problem because we could fly them in. Can he now tell us how we can get radioisotopes supplied to us if we are not a member of Euratom?

Matt Hancock: Access to radioisotopes is precisely through the aviation route—that is exactly what I said to the hon. Lady last time, and I say it to her again today.
David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Was the Secretary of State for Transport advised by any officials that his decision to award a contract to Seaborne Freight would result in a challenge in the courts by Eurotunnel?

Matt Hancock: This is not linked to the Seaborne Freight contract; this is about ensuring that the contracts that are in place are able to deliver the unhindered supply of medicines in whatever Brexit scenario.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I do not know about you, Mr Speaker, but I think this is the worst “Hancock’s Half Hour” I have ever seen—and it is in colour for the first time. The Secretary of State, in response to the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald)—I am grateful to him for securing the urgent question—advised the House that he has been speaking to the devolved Administrations. When did it come to pass that the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland have to discuss out-of-court settlements to get medicines with the devolved Administrations?

Matt Hancock: I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman had a question in there, but all I will say is that of course discussing the supply of medicines with the devolved Administrations is important, to ensure that those supplies reach all parts of the UK. The devolved Administrations support the wish to ensure that we have in place the capacity to deliver that unhindered supply, and I think that he should support that too.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP) rose—

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

Mr Speaker: I call Drew Hendry.

Drew Hendry: The streak continues, Mr Speaker.

I am going to be more charitable to the Government, because I think they blatantly realise that having no Secretary of State for Transport is infinitely better than having the one they have got. We have listened to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care’s fairy tale about medicines today, but will he at least have the decency to admit that £33 million is a lot of money, especially to people facing hardship on universal credit, the disabled and the low-waged?

Matt Hancock: It is very important that we always remember that this is taxpayers’ money. One of the duties of Government is to use taxpayers’ money to keep people safe, and that means having an unhindered supply of medicines, which is what we on the Government Benches are working so hard to deliver.

Douglas Chapman: This is not about the deal; this is all about incompetence at Government level, with £50 million for the original no-ships contract and a further £35 million in legal compensation to clear up the Eurotunnel mess. Now that the Government have found the magic money tree, how much is coming to Scotland, since we actually have ferries that we want to run?

Matt Hancock: I find it astonishing that Members on the Opposition Benches continue to make the case that this is not about medicines; it is all about medicines, because that is what we are going to be putting on this capacity in the event of a no-deal Brexit. It is about ensuring that, whatever happens on Brexit, people can still be safe. That is why this cross-Government decision was the right one to take. I think it is the same decision that anybody in the House would have taken were they in this place.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Points of order are flowing from this urgent question and, exceptionally, I will take them, if they are relatively brief.

Andy McDonald: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance. This is now the second time that I have tabled an urgent question asking the Transport Secretary to come to the House and respond. We are told that he is busy—presumably pouring more money down the drain. Should he not be here, and what can you do to secure his attendance?

While we are at it, will the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care come to the Dispatch Box and explain that he has inadvertently misled the House by saying that this has nothing to do with Seaborne Freight? It has everything to do with that contract. That was the reason Eurotunnel took the Government to court in the first place. He must put the record straight.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the shadow Secretary of State for his point of order. As he will know, the choice of Minister to respond to an urgent question is exclusively a matter for the Government. For example, it is commonplace for somebody other than the Secretary of State to appear. It is not altogether uncommon for a Department other than that at which the question was tabled to field a representative to respond. I recognise that it is relatively unusual for the Secretary of State in the Department questioned not to appear, and for someone who rejoices in the seniority of Secretary of State in another Department to appear instead, but we should never underestimate the enthusiasm, stoicism and commitment to regular performance in the Chamber of the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, and he has demonstrated that again this afternoon. Colleagues will form their own assessment of how he has batted at the wicket of the governmental team.

As to what the Secretary of State said about the question not being about Seaborne Freight, I think I will say that he has placed his own interpretation on the matter, and colleagues will form their own assessment. I thought that most of the inquiries were about legal action flowing from the cancellation of the contract, but the Secretary of State does have a legitimate public policy interest in the matter, both as a member of the Government and because of his regard for the safe delivery of medicines. Some people will think that he was absolutely right, and others will think that his interpretation of matters was a tad quirky, but nevertheless he has offered us his own assessment and colleagues can now assess it at leisure, possibly over their tea.

Layla Moran: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In reply to my question, the Secretary of State said:
Matt Hancock: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You are an esteemed and eloquent Member of this House, as you often say to us, and you have just made a comment about what this case was about. Can I be very clear? The reason we settled this case, as I said to the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), was to ensure that the freight capacity purchased from DFDS and Brittany Ferries continues, in order to have the unhindered supply of medicines. That is what the settlement was about.

Mr Speaker: No, no—I am not arguing the toss with the Secretary of State. I said earlier that he placed his own interpretation on what he judged to be the gravamen of the matter. That the question was about the cancellation of the contract and that it was about Seaborne Freight is, I think, so manifestly clear as to brook no contradiction by any sensible person. That it also related to the delivery of medicines was a perfectly arguable point. The Secretary of State has made his own point in his own way, and if he is satisfied with his own efforts and goes about his business with an additional glint in his eye and spring in his step, then I am very happy for him.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Further to those points of order, Mr Speaker. You take pride in being a Speaker who is very generous in allowing urgent questions to be asked. The whole reason for urgent questions is so that parliamentarians, particularly Back Benchers, can hold the Government to account. It is quite clearly frustrating today that, yet again, the Transport Secretary, who is culpable for this mess, has not come to answer the questions. We have a stand-in Health Minister who has parroted two lines in response to every question that has been asked: first, “This is about medicines”; and secondly, “If you don’t like it, back the deal.” This is palpable nonsense, and it makes a mockery of urgent questions that are to hold the Government to account. I also know that, as a parliamentarian, if I submit written parliamentary questions on this scenario, the answers will come back saying “commercial confidentiality”, and I will not get any clear information. I am asking for guidance, Mr Speaker, on how we get real information out of this Government when they are trying to shroud everything in secrecy.

Mr Speaker: On the matter of secrecy, the Government will make their own judgment about what constitutes commercial confidentiality, and every Government are entitled to do that. More widely, I would say to the hon. Gentleman that he has a number of recourses. He has, potentially, access to freedom of information legislation like any citizen. As far as the business of the House, it is open to him and to others to table written questions—not necessarily an isolated question but potentially a series or, if necessary, several series of questions. It is open to Members to put oral questions to Ministers. It is open to them to apply, as happened today, for an urgent question. It is open to them also to seek debates under
the auspices of the Backbench Business Committee or, in certain circumstances that commend themselves to the Chair, under the terms of Standing Order No. 24.

I understand that the hon. Gentleman—I mean this very sincerely and, not least, for the benefit of those who are listening to our proceedings—is disquieted, not to say irritated. However, I suppose I am making the point that I have often made to Members on both sides of the House, including, some months ago, to the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa), who very sagely took my advice last week: persist, persist, persist. That is the essence of success in parliamentary endeavour—not to make a point once but to pursue one’s goal on a continued, indefatigable, and, if necessary, remorseless basis. I think that the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) has become accustomed to such an approach over the past four years in which he has served as a Member of the House.

I thank the Members who have raised points of order and the Secretary of State for proffering his replies. We will have to leave it there for today.

6.35 pm

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the work the Government are doing to support our towns.

Last week, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister informed this House that the Government would launch a new fund to help our towns to grow and prosper. Today, I am delighted to confirm further details of our new stronger towns fund—a £1.6 billion fund in England, between now and 2026, to help our towns to grasp the opportunities available to them in the years to come.

The British people, supported by the balanced, long-term approach taken by this Government, have worked hard to rebuild the economy after the debts we inherited in 2010. As a result, we have seen strong and consistent growth, but we want to make sure that the benefits of that growth help to support towns across the country. The country voted for Brexit—communities expressing their desire to see change in their local areas. That must be a change for the better, with more opportunity and greater control.

It is important to remind all Members that as we move to support our nations and regions to take control of their own economic destiny, we do not start with a blank slate. Since 2010, seven city regions in England have elected metro mayors, with an eighth to follow in May. We created the local growth fund and devolved it to local enterprise partnerships across England to invest in their priorities for growth. We have agreed, jointly with devolved Governments and their local authorities, city and growth deals, including in Cardiff capital region and in Glasgow and the Clyde valley, with billions of pounds of additional funding. Our modern industrial strategy sets out a clear plan for the future that puts places at the heart of our ambition to create an economy that works for everyone.

But we know there is more to do. That is why we are in negotiations with other parts of the UK on more deals, including in Belfast and in Derry/Londonderry. It is why we are agreeing local industrial strategies with all places in England to get, for the first time, a real, long-term sense of what their local economies could look like in 30 years’ time. Our new stronger towns fund will build on that approach and extend our principles of devolution further, out to the towns that our success was built on. Through this, we will ensure that we spread opportunity more widely so that every community can benefit from our economic prosperity. It will be used to create new jobs, help to train local people and boost growth, with communities having a say on how the money is spent.

Today, I have published notional allocations of £1 billion of the fund. I have allocated that amount based on need. I have looked at the relative productivity, income and skills levels, and targeted more funding to those places with levels that are lower than the average, ensuring that local towns can access the funding needed to support productivity growth. Given that we all know that pockets of deprivation exist even in our most successful local economies, I have made sure that we take into account such very localised economic conditions. We will work with local areas to explore town deals that unlock local potential, investing in places and investing in people.
Today, I can therefore confirm initial allocations of £583 million to towns across the northern powerhouse, £322 million to those in the midlands engine, and £95 million across the south. The remaining £600 million will be invested following a competitive process that I invite all towns to take part in. I will publish a prospectus, which will include further details of the process, and I am keen to encourage high-quality, ambitious bids.

The message today to all Members who serve our towns is that we want those who know these places best—community leaders, local businessmen and women, civic leaders and others—to begin to think about the investments that could build on their heritage, improve productivity and boost the life chances of all their people and to bring those into a coherent plan that sets out a positive vision that people living there can rally behind and play a role in making happen.

As a Government, we have set out the value of investing in infrastructure, people, business and ideas in our industrial strategy, and we want each place to tell us the balance between those priorities for their town. We also want our local institutions to be involved. No one knows towns better than the local councils that serve them, and we want to ensure that local enterprise partnerships and mayoral combined authorities take a leading role. The Business Secretary and I are working with them on the development of local industrial strategies across England. LEPs and MCAs should play a guiding role to ensure that the plans of individual towns across a functional economic area are joined up, so that the overall strategy is greater than the sum of its parts. After all, we know that the success of many of our towns is intrinsically linked to the success of those around them.

Today’s announcement is also about our commitment to the whole Union. The Government will seek to ensure that towns in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland can benefit from the stronger towns fund. This will build on the success of our city and growth deal initiatives. Today, we extend our approach to devolution and make a new offer to towns and the millions of hard-working people who live in them to set their own futures.

Finally, I want to impress on the House what the prize at stake is: people coming together, the public and private sectors working with their communities to set out what their towns can be if everyone pulls together and works together, and the steps it will take in the short term to make that vision happen. The stronger towns fund is this Government’s offer to help make that become a reality.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) is spearheading plans in his constituency, and other towns, such as Blackpool, are bursting with ideas. So many people who care so much about the towns in which they live are passionate to see that their potential is fulfilled, harnessing the strength of place and identity and unlocking the potential of all parts of our proud United Kingdom. I share that ambition and am intent to see that, as we look to the future, all parts of our country play their part and no one is left behind. This fund is part of helping to achieve that, and I commend this statement to the House.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement, but we should call this out for what it is. This supposed funding boost is a pittance that will do little compared with the billions that his Government have already cut from our local communities. It will do little to reverse the damage that they have inflicted in each and every region. The reason that many of our towns are struggling is a near decade of politically imposed cuts, including to council funding and public services, by this Conservative Government. No one should be hoodwinked by such a shameful and pitiful attempt to gain support for the Prime Minister’s botched withdrawal agreement.

The fact is that between 2010 and 2020, councils will have lost 60p out of every £1 that the Government provide for services. Why has the Secretary of State cut 60p in every £1 from local government? Why did he not announce a reversal of that cut today, considering that it has left local services facing a funding gap of £3.2 billion? By 2025, the gap facing our local councils will rise to £7.8 billion.

If that was not bad enough, at a time when the Government should be reinvesting in our most deprived areas, they are instead cutting them even harder. Nine of the 10 most deprived councils in England have seen cuts of almost three times the national average. With such policies, does the Secretary of State believe that his party is truly showing itself to be the party for the few and not the many, or is this, as many of us suspect, a thinly veiled effort to mask its near decade of failure?

The Secretary of State says that he has taken deprivation into account when considering the allocation of this fund. That is baffling, because earlier in oral questions he again refused to say that deprivation would be included when considering the local government settlement. Why is deprivation rightly included in this fund but not the fair funding formula review? He mentioned Blackpool, yet Blackpool—the most deprived area in England—has seen a cut in spending power of more than £45 million this decade. That is more than the £40 million a year that the entire north-west of England will get from this fund.

Compared with the cuts that the Conservative Government have inflicted on our local communities across the country, this funding announcement is a drop in the ocean. We have seen cuts in spending of £7.3 billion over the past decade as a result of nine years of austerity. Even if we are being favourable to Ministers, the Government’s enticement is £5.7 billion short of the cuts that they have already inflicted. It is £434 million short of the damage they have caused to the east of England; £405 million short of the damage they have caused to the east midlands; £505 million short of the damage they have caused to the north-east; £1.18 billion short of the north-west; £273 million short of the damage they have caused to the south-east; £353 million short of the damage they have caused to the south-west; £709 million short of the damage they have caused to the west midlands; and £735 million short of the damage they have caused to Yorkshire and the Humber. What does the Secretary of State have to say to local people in regions for which this money still leaves a massive shortfall of hundreds of millions of pounds?

[James Brokenshire]
The funding promised by the Secretary of State over the next seven years does not even get close to matching the amount that regions have received from the European Union over the last seven years through European regional development and social funding. This package is £642 million a year short of the money that English regions would have received, and that is despicable.

This announcement is inadequate and confused. Why is £600 million unallocated? Why is there no clarity at all about where the money will go and on what? The Secretary of State talked about other parts of the United Kingdom. Will this money be distributed through Barnett consequentials, or will the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government be given a new role? What will the allocations to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland be? Why did No. 10 not know what period the fund was for this morning, only for it then to be clarified that it is a long period of seven years?

There is still time for Ministers to reconsider the cuts to councils. I ask the Secretary of State to do so, and to do so immediately, because the danger for us all is that our communities will continue to decline if they do not get the proper support they need. It is time for a Government that will give our towns and communities the funding, resources and support they need to recover—one that will act genuinely in the interests of the many, not the few.

James Brokenshire: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. He sets out a narrative in relation to the savings that councils have had to make, but he ignores the fact that the last Labour Government had already set in train cuts to local government. The idea that cuts would not have had to be made by any incumbent Government is simply not a reflection of the reality.

The hon. Gentleman sets out various points in relation to the benefits attached to different communities and investment into regions, but he ignores the £9.1 billion of local growth funds to local enterprise partnerships through three rounds of competitive growth deals, the investment of £3.4 billion for the northern powerhouse, £1.9 billion for the midlands, £700 million for the east of England, £2.1 billion for London and the south-east and £970 million for the south-west. He does not mention the coastal communities fund, the home building fund and the housing infrastructure fund, and he does not mention the national productivity investment fund, which is all about investing in our regions and our communities, and ensuring that we grow productivity and all communities are able to benefit further.

However, this is about towns, as I have indicated. It is about the towns that need a sense of identity and sense of growth, as I set out in my statement. Yes, on the allocation of £1 billion, which the hon. Gentleman asks me to set out, there are notional allocations to the particular regions, and we want to see bids from towns, working with the local enterprise partnerships, coming through in a very positive way. Equally, as I indicated in my statement as well, we want to ensure that we reflect on the fact that towns in other areas may not necessarily fall within those neat parameters. We therefore want to see bids come in from towns across the country for deals based on their ability to set out their bright, positive future.

The hon. Gentleman listed a number of figures in relation to, as he set it out, cuts. I would say to him, equally, that he well knows that the local government financial settlement this year has a real-terms increase in the money going to the core spending power of local councils across the country. He asks what we can point to in other areas. Let us look at the changes in employment that this Government have seen: there has been a 5% increase in the north-east, 7.1% in the north-west, 7.7% in Yorkshire and the Humber, 6.8% in the east midlands, 10.1% in the west midlands, 9.1% in the east, 22.4% in London, 7.5% in the south-east and 8% in the south-west. This Government are growing the economy and seeing the benefit in jobs and prosperity, and we want to take this to the next level.

The hon. Gentleman highlighted the devolved Administrations. We will seek to ensure that towns in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland can benefit, building on the success of the UK Government’s city and growth deals. We will confirm in due course the additional funding we will provide to reflect this new funding for England. This is about the determination we have for our towns—those places at the heart of our growth, our identity and our sense of who we are as a United Kingdom. I am sorry if he cannot see that, but it is actually about investing in the future, investing in our communities and seeing the bright, positive future ahead for our United Kingdom.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): This is an excellent announcement, and I particularly welcome what the Secretary of State has said about money for the midlands engine. He said that any town may apply, and given the very serious structural change going on in the town centre of the royal town of Sutton Coldfield, resulting from the decline in retail and the need for a reconfiguration in what we do, will he confirm that the royal town of Sutton Coldfield will be able to apply? He mentioned that there will be challenge funding and competition for the funds, which is very welcome, and he also said that the most local element is the one closest to those it represents, so will he confirm that, with the largest town council in the country, the Royal Sutton Coldfield Town Council will be able to apply for this challenge funding?

James Brokenshire: I welcome the pitch my right hon. Friend has made for Sutton Coldfield. I do want to see ambitious applications coming in from towns across our country. That is why, as he will no doubt note, we have made a provisional allocation to the west midlands of £212 million from the main £1 billion fund, but, equally, there is the ability, on the competitive element, to bid for the £600 million, too. I want to see really ambitious proposals coming forward, because this has the potential to transform the future of a number of our towns. By having such an ambition, I know that we can achieve that.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Another day, another tawdry bribe by this Government to distract and to grab headlines from their failing Brexit plans.

First, I want to ask the Secretary of State whether this money will be Barnettised for Scotland, and when can we expect to receive that money? Every single— [Interruption.] Mr Speaker, I want to know whether this will be Barnettised because every single city deal so far has seen Scotland short-changed, with more money going in from the Scottish Government than from the UK Government time and again.
I do not grudge any town any investment, but this is simply a bauble on the bare Christmas tree of austerity. The £1.6 billion announced today pales into insignificance compared with what the EU funds would have put in. The Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions estimates that, over the same period, the UK would be due €13 billion. The £33 million for the south-west alone is only one Grayling.

The Secretary of State still cannot tell us anything useful about the UK shared prosperity fund—how it will work, whether it will be fully devolved to the Scottish Government to administer and whether its needs-based formula will apply to the money that he seeks to dole out. Is this another power grab? Will the funding levels for this shared prosperity fund be at the very least the same level that they are at now, because the Scottish National party will not accept one penny less?

We are getting into this Brexit situation, but Scotland did not choose Brexit, we did not choose this Tory Government and we do not choose to have this Tory Government rip us off time and again. We have seen Northern Ireland getting £1 billion un-Barnettised, and these are further funds going un-Barnettised, as far as we know. The CPMR says that Scotland would be due to receive £840 million in structural funding between now and 2027. Will the Government tell us exactly how much Scotland is getting and when we will get it?

James Brokenshire: As I have indicated already, in response to earlier questions, we will confirm the additional funding we will provide to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to reflect this new funding for England.

The hon. Lady asks about the UK shared prosperity fund, which is separate from this; I want to stress that. We are committed to creating the new fund to reduce inequalities between communities across our four nations by raising productivity once we have left the EU. We will operate that across the United Kingdom. We have made a commitment that we will respect the devolution settlements in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and we will engage with the devolved Administrations to ensure that the fund works for all places across our United Kingdom.

We will consult widely on the design of the UK shared prosperity fund. I recognise the importance of reassuring local areas on the future of local growth and we will also be consulting firmly with the devolved Administrations. We have repeated our commitment to respect the devolution settlement and we intend to commence discussions between Ministers of the UK Government and the Governments of the nations in advance of the consultation. The hon. Lady can have my assurance of that in relation to the UK shared prosperity fund. We are committed to do that.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I strongly welcome this post-Brexit dividend, which I am sure is the beginning of more dividend to come. My right hon. Friend kindly mentioned my constituency of Harlow, which, despite being a wonderful place to live, has significant deprivation and disadvantage. Will he confirm the timing and the mechanisms for applying for this grant, so that we can apply for regeneration and for our new hospital? Although the east of England gets £25 million, will he confirm the mechanism for applying for money from the extra £600 million fund that he has announced?

James Brokenshire: My right hon. Friend rightly makes the distinction between the two elements of the fund and the town deals that we want to see emerging from both of them. On the first element, we have allocated this on the basis of a number of different factors, but I will be publishing a prospectus—that is the next stage—to set out the application process and the basis for the applications we want to see coming through from the towns that can apply under the £600 million fund. We will be setting that out in detail so that towns such as Harlow, which I know he is so passionate about, are able to apply.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware that, if the UK were still a member of the EU after 2020, South Yorkshire would again be eligible for less-developed region status because its economy has fallen back against EU averages since 2014. If it were entitled to EU funding, South Yorkshire would receive £1 billion over seven years. So either his announcement today is totally inadequate, or he is going to promise that, under the shared prosperity fund, South Yorkshire will get exactly what it would have got under EU funding if we were still in the EU.

James Brokenshire: One of the things that would encourage investment in the right hon. Gentleman’s area is getting the devolution deal done in relation to South Yorkshire, Sheffield and the Sheffield city region, as he well knows. He makes an important point about the distinction between this fund and the UK shared prosperity fund, which will follow. Those are separate, and there will be a consultation on the prosperity fund and, indeed, the settlement of amounts in the spending review. There is more to come, so this fund should not be seen in isolation. It links into more funding and more structures that will support growth in all areas.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): I commend to my right hon. Friend the “Transforming Nuneaton” project, which is very much designed to regenerate Nuneaton town centre and make it fit for the 21st century. A bid is going to be made for the future high streets fund. Is that compatible with the stronger towns fund so that further bids can be made?

James Brokenshire: There will certainly be some overlap with the high streets fund, so there is an opportunity for town centres and town deals to come together in this way, and there are different purposes that the high streets fund is intended to advance. There is potential to be transformative through the fund that we have announced and, indeed, the new stronger towns fund that I am announcing today.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): I welcome the Minister’s understanding that, for decades, our towns have suffered from chronic under-investment and disrespect from national politicians. It is therefore frustrating to hear him talk about handing decision-making powers over this funding to local enterprise partnerships, which have enabled this city-centric model of decision making to persist for far too long. They do not understand our towns and they are not accountable to them. I urge him to make a
commitment today to move those decision-making powers to communities and their local councils, which understand best what we need. If he is serious in his acknowledgement that our towns are proud, important places, he must trust us to make these decisions for ourselves.

James Brokenshire: I absolutely recognise the impassioned statement that the hon. Lady has set out on the significance of our towns. We see this as a partnership. Ultimately, those bids, those ideas, and those things that will make a difference in our towns, have to come from the community—from councils, businesses and civic leaders who can shape those ideas, make sure that those bids are competitive and ambitious, and deliver the transformation that she wants for her area and that I would want for her area too. We will work with this, and we will make it work so that towns are seen to have that strength, we get the deals in place and see the sort of thing that she is talking about.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Almost £1 billion has been allocated to the new stronger towns fund. When will we know when those allocations have been confirmed to individual communities?

James Brokenshire: There are two elements, as my hon. Friend will appreciate. The first element is the notional allocations that I have set out, and we will work to provide further detail in relation to the LEP allocations and the next steps on that. Then there is the prospectus that sits alongside the £600 million, which will allow people to bid. I anticipate that there will be different phases, because different towns and communities will need to build their plans and get their ideas together, but I will set out further details in due course.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Towns such as ours in Yorkshire are sick of losing vital services such as libraries, buses, community centres, jobcentres, courts and maternity units, and we need that investment. Our job growth has been half the level of job growth in cities since 2010, but the problem is that the Government are still cutting investment in councils that serve our towns. Analysis by the House of Commons Library this afternoon shows that the cuts in funding for councils covering Yorkshire towns over the next two years alone far outweigh any investment that our towns are likely to get from the funds that the Secretary of State has announced. Does he not accept that, unless councils have the investment and unless we get a fair deal on transport, rather than the rubbish one we get at the moment, we will still not get a fair deal for our towns?

James Brokenshire: For a number of reasons that the right hon. Lady has set out, I would expect her to welcome the allocation for Yorkshire and the Humber of £197 million, set out in today’s announcement, to allow towns to bid for that and to see some of those transformations, whether in transport or other aspects. I would gently underline to her that core funding growth for councils in the forthcoming year has increased, recognising a number of pressures that exist. I have spoken about other funds and, together with those, I see this as transformative. I hope that she and others can work with us to ensure that it has an impact in her community as much as anywhere else.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I welcome the fund, especially the funding for Yorkshire and northern Lincolnshire, as we prefer to call it. When I was Minister for local growth, I trotted up to No. 10 and pitched something very similar, but I was not as effective as the current ministerial team, so I congratulate them. I agree with the point made by the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy). When I was responsible for the local growth fund—there were good reasons for it—I was frustrated by the fact that much of it was predicated on a city-centric model, so can we have an assurance this time that, important as investment in cities is on a sub-regional basis, this will absolutely be focused on our towns, and we will seek to work in partnership with things such as the coastal communities fund and the new future high streets fund so that we have a proper, joined-up policy in this regard?

James Brokenshire: I welcome what my hon. Friend has said on that join-up and on the potential that it offers between the different funds, and his emphasis on towns. Yes, the focus thus far has been on cities, which is why this is about setting out a different course, recognising that towns in many ways have been left behind. It is why we need to focus more on seeing the solutions at that level, where we can make a significant difference, and I look forward to working with him as we take that forward.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) and the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) have made important points, which I am sure the Secretary of State will contemplate. Is he delighted by the cross-party support for this welcome initiative? In accepting the enthusiasm, including from the Labour Front Bench, will he feed back to the Chancellor that such is the enthusiasm of Members across the House for this idea, that if more moneys are put into the fund, that will be even more welcome?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s invitation. He makes an important point, because in some ways this transcends party. It is about how we reshape our towns, recognising that some have been left behind because of lack of investment from many, many Governments. This fund begins to reset that relationship, and there is almost a new sense of Unionism, with a strong sense of all communities playing their part. We should look positively at what the fund can deliver alongside other initiatives so that our towns are absolutely at the forefront.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): Lowestoft is a town with a proud history that faces significant challenges, including deep pockets of deprivation. However, there is an exciting future in which Government can play a pivotal role in unlocking potential. My concern is that the money from the coastal communities fund is spread thinly around the coast, and the east of England is at the bottom of the table of regional beneficiaries of this fund, so resources will not be available to unlock that potential. Can the Secretary of State allay my concerns?

James Brokenshire: What I would say to my hon. Friend in relation to Lowestoft and the work of the coastal communities fund is that today’s announcement has two elements: the £1 billion—he references the
£25 million notional allocation to the east of England—and the £600 million for competitive bids. Lowestoft should be positive, put in its submission and get the concept of its own town deal together, so we can pool resources, through the coastal communities fund, the future high streets fund and this fund, and it can have a bright, positive future.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): We were promised that Wales would not lose a penny if we left the EU, but the grubby money offered to the UK’s most deprived areas is petty in comparison to the £2 billion Wales currently receives from the EU over the 2014-20 cycle. If this is the pork-barrel future of UK politics, Wales is better off out of it. Will this fund be Barnettised, or will the Secretary of State admit that this money is indeed all about need—not economic need or social inequality need, but the Prime Minister’s need to tout for votes for her deal?

James Brokenshire: We are looking to the UK shared prosperity fund to replace the European structural investment funds that the hon. Lady references. The Government have already guaranteed the full 2014-20 allocations, providing assurance to all parts of the UK in all scenarios. The UK shared prosperity fund will follow. As I indicated, we will confirm in due course the additional funding to be provided to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to reflect the new funding for England.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I welcome the establishment of the stronger towns fund. Will my right hon. Friend assure the House that towns across the midlands and the north, from Cleethorpes to Coalville and from Accrington to Ashby-de-la-Zouch, will have an opportunity to benefit from this fund?

James Brokenshire: Yes. My hon. Friend will have heard about the allocations already set out as part of today’s announcement. It is that sense of ambition, that positive sense of what can be achieved for our towns, that lies at the heart of it and why I believe it has the potential to be so transformative.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): The Secretary of State said that towns such as Blackpool are bursting with ideas. Unfortunately, his funding for such towns is wholly inadequate. His seven-year itch, if I can describe it as such, will deliver £280 million to the north-west. By my reckoning, that is £40 million a year for the whole of the north-west. Blackpool, as my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) said, has lost half a billion pounds in council funding cuts from this Government and their predecessor since 2010. So how can he possibly sit there with a straight face and say that this is a transformative process? I think the old saying, “The louder he protested his honour, the faster we counted the spoons” is probably more appropriate.

James Brokenshire: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman does not reflect the work that has been going in through the coastal communities fund, of which Blackpool has been a real beneficiary, and the work we are looking to take forward to give a sense of a new deal for Blackpool. Indeed, he highlights local government finance, while ignoring other sources of income for councils—business rate growth, council tax and so on. When we look at the fund I am talking about today, whether with those other funds, we can see the bright positive future I want to see for Blackpool, as I want to see for towns up and down the country.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. I note that at the beginning he described the fund as a £1.6 billion fund in England, but of course my ears pricked up at every mention of Scotland. When he came to the sentence, “The Government will seek to ensure that towns in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland can benefit from the stronger towns fund”, my ears truly did prickle up. May I ask my right hon. Friend how?

James Brokenshire: I recognise the need for towns across our United Kingdom to benefit and to see that positive sense of what can be achieved, in many ways applying the lessons learned from our city and growth deals initiative. It is that type of approach that we intend to pursue further. As I indicated in response to other questions, recognising that this involves new funding for England, we will set out details on additional funding for Scotland, and how that will benefit towns in Scotland and across the whole of our United Kingdom. That is the positive future we want to see for my hon. Friend’s constituents and all constituents across the UK.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): It should not have taken a referendum and Brexit to get the focus on towns we are hearing about today. I was proud to take part, with Labour colleagues, in two Westminster Hall debates on culture in our towns and transport in our towns, both of which are vitally important. From my end, it is really important that this fund does not just morph into every other fund that currently exists and that the local enterprise partnerships end up as the sole arbiters of whether bids can go forward. It is also important to recognise that within every big town there are many smaller towns and communities. I want to know and want to be reassured that there will be a voice not just for elected representatives, businesses and so on, but for the ordinary, everyday people who do not feel that the projects at the end of their street are being listened to and attended to. Will the Secretary of State guarantee that in those circumstances match funding will not be necessary for them to secure a bid?

James Brokenshire: The right hon. Lady makes very powerful and important points about the role and voice of communities, the recognition that there are different towns of different sizes and how they need to be connected into this, and the role of Members of Parliament. I want grassroots communities to be properly engaged and involved in helping to shape the deals. That is the challenge and the approach I adopt, so that we do not slip into the sort of approach she rightly challenges those of us on the Government Benches on about how we can make a difference. I am willing to work with her, and Members across the House, to ensure that we reflect the vision and passion she sets out and that we get this right.
Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): The Secretary of State's announcement today has caused a great deal of concern in Cornwall. We were told that the allocation would be based on need and deprivation, yet Cornwall, an area that has some of the lowest wages and productivity and some of the highest levels of deprivation in the country, has been put in with the south-west and received one of the lowest allocations. Will the Secretary of State please explain why Cornwall has had such a low allocation, and will he reassure the people of Cornwall that the criteria used for this allocation will bear no relation to the criteria used for the shared prosperity fund when it replaces European structural funding once we leave the EU?

James Brokenshire: I can give that assurance to my hon. Friend. The UK shared prosperity fund is a completely different process and we look forward to consulting in detail on that. I recognise the challenges Cornwall faces. I have a really positive sense of what Cornwall can be from the exciting projects my hon. Friend showed me on my visit to parts of his constituency last year. The notional allocations have been set out based on productivity, income, skills deprivation and the proportion of the population living in towns, with all those criteria weighted together. I want him to remain ambitious. I am ambitious for Cornwall: what it can do, the opportunities that are there, and how the £600 million, as part of the overall fund, provides huge potential, alongside all the other great initiatives that I know are happening in Cornwall.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The north-east will get £105 million, which means £15 million a year over seven years. That is £5 per person per year. Under the European system, we would have received £500 per person each year. At the same time, Durham County Council has had cuts of £212 million. This is totally inadequate. Furthermore, the Secretary of State's practice of having a packet for this and a packet for that, and a fund for this and a fund for that, means long-term planning is impossible. The only productivity he is increasing is the productivity of his officials in increasing the number of press releases they deliver.

James Brokenshire: I am sorry that the hon. Lady has not recognised that the north-east has had the highest allocation per capita of any part of the country and therefore the recognition that has been given in that way. I do not accept the challenge she sets out in terms of long-term funding arrangements. We still have the UK shared prosperity fund to come, which talks to some of the replacement for the European funding she mentions. The assembly of the different funds together does allow that opportunity to be transformative. I want her to realise that, recognise that, and work with us to make that happen for her towns as well.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement, which builds on the Prime Minister's commitment from her first day in Downing Street. Will he clarify whether the projects that are currently being carried out in Cleethorpes through the coastal communities fund and the Government's commitments made through the Greater Grimsby town deal can be enhanced by this additional funding?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend highlights the contribution of the Greater Grimsby town fund and the work that the coastal communities fund is delivering for his constituents, as well as the potential for this new fund to add to that. Precisely that sense of what the existing funding—through the coastal communities fund and the future high streets fund—is able to do to be transformative is the reason I hope colleagues will get behind it.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): To put this rehashed, re-mashed £1.6 billion into perspective, Wales alone has received £4.5 billion in funding from Europe since 2000. Will the Secretary of State explain exactly how much Wales will benefit from this funding announcement? Does he agree, to draw upon some porcine sayings, that this is pork—barrel politics at its lowest and that the good people of Wales will see this pig in a poke a mile off?

James Brokenshire: No. Again, I underline the contribution that the UK shared prosperity fund will have, and we will set out the details of the contribution for Wales, recognising that we want all parts of the UK to benefit.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): While I welcome the aims and ambitions of the fund, will the Secretary of State outline why he is unable to come to the Dispatch Box tonight to explain how much money will be available for Scotland and to towns in Moray? When will he do that and how much will be available, because that is extremely important for the whole of the United Kingdom, including Scotland?

James Brokenshire: I commit to my hon. Friend to see that we set out that detail as soon as possible. I want to ensure that the fund benefits all parts of the United Kingdom and that we learn the lessons about the benefits from the Government's city and growth deal initiatives. We will set out that additional funding, recognising that England is getting new funds from this and that Scotland will, too.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): My town of Barnsley has seen its budget cut by 40% over the last nine years—nearly £700 per person. Does the Minister honestly think that today's announcement makes up for the huge cuts that the Government have made to my town?

James Brokenshire: Again, I highlight the South Yorkshire devolution deal, which can bring additional investment into the hon. Lady's community. I have highlighted a range of other funds that are available and that can be benefited from, such as the future high streets fund to transform high streets. I encourage her to get behind those funds and deals and to see that her area is investing and putting applications in to help to make the difference for her constituents.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I welcome the £212 million that has been allocated to the west midlands, but will the Secretary of State reassure my constituents that Birmingham and the urban conurbations will not gobbled up most of that money and that market towns such as Shifnal, Newport and Wellington in my constituency, working with the Marches local enterprise partnership, will see a lot of this funding, not just the rump of it?
James Brokenshire: That is why this is a town-based approach, not a city deal of the kind that we have seen before. I recognise how that has benefited our cities, but we need to ensure that our towns benefit, too. It is why that lies at the heart of the fund’s structure and my hon. Friend should be confident about the towns in his area being able to make those bids. I hope and want to see them succeed.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It would be disingenuous of me not to welcome the Minister’s statement, but it would also be disingenuous of me not to say that I am a wee bit concerned that there are no figures at all on what will be given to Scotland and Wales. Will the Minister therefore tell us two things? First, in terms of coming back to the House and informing us about the moneys for Scotland and Wales, will he make sure that the Governments of Scotland and Wales are told first? Secondly, and this is important for Members for English constituencies, last week the Government gave Northern Ireland £140 million outside of the block grant. Will that be replicated in England, Wales and Scotland, and if not, why not?

James Brokenshire: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be able to ask others about the situation in Northern Ireland. We will ensure, in coming back to the House, that Members of the House are informed about additional funding for Scotland and Wales, and equally, we will communicate that to the devolved Governments.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I welcome the fact that over half of the first £1 billion of stronger towns funding will come to the north, but will the Secretary of State please consider how small towns such as Middlewich, Sandbach and Alsager in my constituency could bid directly for funding, not just through the filter of a large principal authority or a LEP, because only then will local townspeople really have confidence that their grassroots needs will be considered by the funding decision makers?

James Brokenshire: We are reflecting on precisely that point. Terms of the separate elements of the fund—the £600 million—and the prospectus that we will produce to ensure that areas are able to make those sorts of bids. Recognising the challenges of different towns and areas and being able to feel the sense of opportunity is why we have sought to break the fund down in the way that we have.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I like the Minister, but I simply cannot recall a ministerial statement that has angered me more. My constituency, the Rhondda, is one of the poorest in the land. My council, because of the Government’s cuts to the Welsh Assembly grant of several billion pounds over the last few years, has had to close schools and libraries. The Government have closed the courts in the constituency and we have some of the lowest wages of anywhere in the country. When he suddenly turns up having discovered the magic money tree, having lectured us for years about its non-existence, I frankly feel furious that we are now meant to feel awfully grateful that we might have a few crumbs from the table. The worst of it is that today, he cannot even bring himself to say how much money is going to go to Wales—probably not a penny, or is he going to say now, “Yes, you are going to have £5, maybe £20, maybe £100”? Come on, tell us how much we are going to get in Wales.

James Brokenshire: I am sorry to anger and disappoint the hon. Gentleman—I have a huge amount of respect and admiration for him and the way that he conducts himself in the House. I recognise that desire to see towns in Wales—in his constituency—being able to benefit from the stronger towns fund. I promise to come back to this House to provide the details in relation to Wales, and hope to see him in slightly better humour on that occasion.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Stoke-on-Trent is a city that is made up of six towns, quite uniquely in our country. Does my right hon. Friend agree that all the six towns that make up Stoke-on-Trent, but especially Longton and Fenton in my constituency, are exactly the sorts of places that must benefit from this funding?

James Brokenshire: I recognise the picture that my hon. Friend paints, and therefore the opportunity that this fund provides. We want to see people being ambitious and really positive about how funding can be transformative and can make that difference, and I look forward to continuing to work with him as we take the fund forward.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I welcome the Government’s conversion to regional funding, but the amounts are derisory by comparison with what has been lost through austerity and economic neglect and what will be lost if the Tory Government’s no-deal/bad-deal Brexit goes through. They refuse to give any details of the shared prosperity fund that the Secretary of State has mentioned a few times, which shows that by comparison with the European Union the Government are less transparent and open—we know that under European Union funding, we would have got up to £1 billion in the north-east. Will he at least say that the north-east would be better off with European Union funding?

James Brokenshire: I have already highlighted the per capita funding the north-east will receive through this fund. We will consult soon on the UK shared prosperity fund—the funding for that will need to be settled through the spending review—and set out the details. We recognise the need for areas such as the north-east to be able to flourish and prosper. I hope the hon. Lady will recognise what this fund delivers and that there is more to come beyond the European structural investment fund guarantee through to 2020. We should look beyond that to the UK shared prosperity fund.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeo) (Con): Somerset has some of the most deprived towns in the south-west, and they really need strengthening, so residents will be a little confused by the numbers in today’s announcement. I welcome the idea that the shared prosperity fund will be calculated differently, but given that productivity is similar in the south-west and the north-west, that income levels are not so different and that about two thirds of my constituents live in towns, it is slightly odd that the north-west gets nearly 10 times as much money. Why is that?
James Brokenshire: We have sought to assess the notional allocations based on the various factors I have spoken about. I recognise that for some people this will be positive and for others it will not be so welcome, but I underline to my hon. Friend the reason we split the fund into two parts and the benefit that his towns should enjoy through the £600 million of separate funding. I encourage him to ensure his towns make a bid through that process.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Batley and Spen, like many towns in the north, is sick to death of being bypassed and left behind—banks closing, theatres closing, cinemas closing, Sure Starts closing, and its council, Kirklees, having a 60% cut since 2010—so I was really excited this morning to look at this fund, until I saw the detail. We have nearly £700 million in European regional development and social funding for 2014-20. Over seven years, that is £97 million a year. This allocation—£197 million—equates to £28 million a year, which is a loss of £70 million in spending power and allocation. The Minister also spoke about Yorkshire and mayors. He had the opportunity to give us loads of money by listening and agreeing to the unequivocal desire for a One Yorkshire. He had the chance to give us that money, but he kicked it out and said no. With the greatest respect, we will not doff our cap for crumbs from the table. We want a fair slice of the cake.

James Brokenshire: I do not want the hon. Lady to doff her cap in any way, shape or form. This fund is part of a package of measures that we will be bringing forward. That is why I have highlighted the UK shared prosperity fund. She talks about European money. That fund is part of the replacement for those funds post-2020. I recognise the passion and ambition and the sense of identity of people across Yorkshire, which is why I had that meeting at the end of last week with Yorkshire leaders. I cannot take the Yorkshire deal forward in the way that she and some of her colleagues may wish, but I certainly have that ambition for Yorkshire, which is something we discussed positively last week.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Boston and Skegness are proud and ambitious towns that, frankly, have been frustrated because we have not been spending money like this for many years on our great towns. I welcome enormously what the Secretary of State is doing today. He is extolling the virtues of a plethora of different funds. It should be for towns to come up with their own ambitions and perhaps for the Department to help them in saying how best they can be put together and allocated from different pots of money.

James Brokenshire: That is why we want to see the development of what I might categorise as town deals, whereby we can bring different funding streams together to support that positive sense of how towns can fulfil their potential. This firmly forms part of that, but, as I have indicated, there are other sources of funding, and bringing those strands together will add that further leverage. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend as we seek to establish more of those town deals.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): The biggest challenge facing many towns, including Cumbernauld, is the impending loss of a major employer: Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. Some 130 offices are set to be closed. If the Government want to support towns, surely HMRC must ditch its plan to move tens of thousands of good-quality jobs away from those very towns and into city centres.

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman has made his point about HMRC, and I will ensure that it is relayed to the appropriate Treasury Minister.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Cheltenham has areas of relative affluence but also pockets of intense deprivation. Does my right hon. Friend agree that any applications must be assessed against the circumstances that prevail in individual neighbourhoods, rather than the town overall, which might lead to an artificial assessment?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. As we form the prospectus for the £600 million element of the fund, it is precisely these factors that we will weigh and consider to ensure it has the impact we want it to have.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): My local council, Rochdale, has had its funding cut by nearly £200 million since 2010, so why does the Secretary of State think that £281 million for the entire north-west—a drop in the ocean compared with the cuts my council has had to make—offers a sustainable plan to strengthen the towns of Heywood and Middleton?

James Brokenshire: As I understand it, the hon. Lady’s constituency benefits from the Greater Manchester devolution deal and the investment it brings to her area. She is confusing different aspects. I have already spoken about the increase in core funding for councils across the country in the coming year. The particular aspect of this fund is its ambition for towns. I want to see towns in her area and across the country harnessing their potential and seeking to make that difference.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): I welcome the Minister’s stronger towns fund. The north-east of Scotland raises an extra £100 million of local taxes a year, but local communities do not see it. Pitmedden, Insch and Huntly, to name a few, would welcome the opportunity to bid for Her Majesty’s Government’s funds. Can the Secretary of State confirm that Scottish towns will get that opportunity?

James Brokenshire: It is precisely that intent that I have set out. We want towns in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to benefit from the stronger towns fund, building on the success of the city and growth deal initiatives, as I have indicated, and I look forward to continuing that conversation with my hon. Friend.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I join hon. Members from Scotland and Wales across the House in being disappointed at today’s statement. The Secretary of State says that the Government will communicate soon what the deal will be for the devolved nations. Does he realise how insulting today’s statement is? Wales is not an add-on or an extension of England. I hope he realises how upset we all are.
James Brokenshire: I share the hon. Lady’s perspective. Wales is no add-on. I want all parts of our United Kingdom to benefit from the funding arrangements, building on the success of the city and growth deal initiatives, which have benefited all parts of our United Kingdom. We want to get this right and to work carefully with colleagues. I recognise her frustration, but I also underline our ambition and desire to fulfil that for her and Members across the House.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I welcome the focus on towns rather than cities. In that spirit, will my right hon. Friend consider allocating a proportion of the east midlands’ £110 million for the regeneration of the old Stanton ironworks for housing and industrial use, which would bring skills and jobs to my constituency?

James Brokenshire: We have set out the relevant notional allocations for the east midlands. I hear what sounds like an interesting and ambitious plan that my hon. Friend has for her constituency, but it must be taken to the next phase and the bid must come together, and I am sure that that will involve working with the local enterprise partnership.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for the commitment that he has shown. He said that Northern Ireland would benefit from the stronger towns fund. My constituency contains four major towns: Newtownards, Cumber, Ballynahinch and Saintfield. Those four strong towns would like to make themselves stronger. When will that happen? When can they apply for these moneys?

James Brokenshire: I know how beautiful the hon. Gentleman’s constituency is, because I have had the privilege of visiting it a number of times, and I recognise his ambition for the towns in his constituency. As I have said, we are seeking to finalise the arrangements for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and I will report back to him to give him a sense of how his towns can benefit.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Too often in the past, money transferred from the United Kingdom Government to the Scottish Government has not reached the communities and public services that Conservative Members would like it to. Will the Secretary of State confirm that my local authority, Scottish Borders Council, can apply directly for funds from this pot of money?

James Brokenshire: As I have said in previous answers, we want to build on the success of the city and growth deal initiatives, which have cemented our approach to the idea of people working together and the bigger picture of how benefit can be felt at community level. That is the approach that we are taking to the next stage and this additional funding, and my hon. Friend’s constituents will be able to feel the benefit.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State’s allocation of just £33 million over seven years for the 5.4 million population of the south-west is insulting. The far south-west and Cornwall in particular contain some of the most deprived communities in the country. The Secretary of State has said that this fund, and the shared prosperity fund, will be allocated on the basis of need. What faith can the south-west have in that when we receive one of the highest levels of needs-based EU funding and one of the lowest levels of need-based Government funding?

James Brokenshire: As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), the UK shared prosperity fund is different. Let me also point out that this fund includes £600 million for competitive bids. I know that the south-west has benefited from the coastal communities fund. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to make applications and see towns across the south-west benefit.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Another one from the south-west, Mr Speaker. I am proud to represent Paignton and Torquay, which are seeing new investment but clearly have some years of decline to tackle in the town centres. Can my right hon. Friend reassure me that the new fund will work in conjunction with, for instance, the coastal communities fund, and could potentially lay the ground for town deals for such places as Torquay and Paignton?

James Brokenshire: Absolutely. I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. Towns such as Paignton and Torquay are great places, but they want more to be done for them. We have the opportunity to consider options such as town deals so that we can advance the agenda and my hon. Friend’s constituents can feel the benefit.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): It is clear that the level of the stronger towns fund—whenever it is announced for Scotland—will not make up for the fact that Scotland is now in danger of losing £840 million in EU structural funds between 2020 and 2027. In response to my question to the Prime Minister on 5 December, she told me that a consultation on the UK shared prosperity fund, which is supposed to replace EU structural funds, would be held by the end of 2018. Given the importance of the EU funds to my constituency, will the Secretary of State update the House on the progress of that consultation?

James Brokenshire: I can say that we have already begun to engage with officials and external stakeholders in the devolved Administrations and discuss our experience of current European funding programmes and priorities for the design of the UK shared prosperity fund. We have repeated our commitment to respect the devolution settlement, and we intend discussions between Ministers in the UK Government and the Governments of those nations to begin before the consultation. Obviously we will take a specific approach in the case of Northern Ireland, in the absence of a sitting Executive, but we are advancing the work on the prosperity fund, and I can assure the hon. Lady that we will work with the Scottish Government in that regard.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): It is welcome that extra money is being provided for communities in the east midlands. In Corby, 64% of people voted to leave the European Union, and there is a strong desire to see a new enterprise zone in the town, not least because the last one, under the Conservative Government in the 1980s, was such a success. Will funds be made available to support such projects?
James Brokenshire: I recognise my hon. Friend’s ambition for Corby, and for an enterprise zone like the one that was there previously. I shall be happy to discuss the details with him. We want towns to feel able to come forward with bids, and we are looking into the various transformative services, skills and jobs that will feature in the new economy that we want to create, along with a sense of ambition for growing enterprise and business. I am sure that this fund can offer that potential to Corby, and to other towns throughout the country.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Most Members can welcome a bit of extra cash for their areas, but we cannot avoid the context of huge cuts in local government funding. Nor can we avoid the context of a possibly imminent Brexit, which makes it difficult to believe that today’s announcement has absolutely nothing to do with that. My question, however, is this: if the Secretary of State can produce indicative allocations for England, why on earth can he not do the same for Wales?

James Brokenshire: In response to the hon. Gentleman’s first point, let me underline the Prime Minister’s commitment during her first days in office, when she spoke of her desire to see a country that worked for everyone and where no one was left behind. The fund that we have announced today is very much part of that agenda, because we want all parts of our United Kingdom to benefit. I have already mentioned the funds for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and I promise the hon. Gentleman that I will report back.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): My I press home the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont)? If this money is simply Barnettised, the Scottish Government will fritter it away on other things, just as they have done with the £92 million on Brexit preparedness, not a penny of which has made its way to any Scottish council. I am sure that, having received yet another real-terms cut from the Scottish Government in the latest Scottish Budget, East Renfrewshire Council will be delighted to be able to bid for the money directly.

James Brokenshire: I recognise my hon. Friend’s ambition for his constituents. We share that ambition. We want towns in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to benefit. We want to get this right. We can build on the success of what we have seen from the city and growth deal initiatives in the past, and we want to strengthen that so that people throughout our United Kingdom can benefit, and can realise their passion for their towns and the potential of those towns.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The Secretary of State has linked this fund to Brexit. My constituency voted leave. As its name suggests, it consists of two towns, both of which contain significant pockets of deprivation. I should have thought that they were exactly the communities for which the fund was designed, but under the rules there is no guarantee that they will see a penny of it. If that comes to pass, will the Secretary of State be saying that he has learned nothing about the reasons why people voted leave, and about the idea that some areas deserve more opportunities than others?

James Brokenshire: This is about towns coming forward with bids and having a sense of ambition, and a sense of how the fund can be transformative and make a difference to people’s life chances. There is still the work in relation to the UK shared prosperity fund, so the hon. Gentleman is wrong to try to link the two. I look forward to working with him, and with other colleagues on both sides of the House, as the further work on the towns fund is advanced through the prospectus involving the £600 million, and I want to see ambitious bids come from towns throughout the country.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Bottesford, Kirton and Scunthorpe are all great towns, but they have all been badly affected by the cuts in Government spending in our area across a whole range of services since 2010. The money that is now being talked about is only a third of what is being cut from local government over the next two years, and there is a bidding culture as well. Sometimes the areas most in need of support have the least capacity to make bids; what is the Secretary of State going to do about that?

James Brokenshire: There is the increase in funding for local government for the forthcoming year, which I have already referred to, and the town approach to this fund is profoundly about communities being able to shape this agenda, with civic leaders, business and the community being able to set out their ideas. I have talked about my ambition for the fund for the hon. Gentleman’s constituents and for people across the whole of our country.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP)

rose—

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)

rose—

Mr Speaker: I call Douglas Chapman.

Douglas Chapman: Thank you, Mr Speaker; it is like winning the raffle.

No doubt the Minister will be aware that many towns throughout the country need a leg up at this time, especially in the run-up to Brexit, but it appears that this deal is very much a case of “except for viewers in Scotland and Wales.” If the Minister is genuinely supporting Scotland and Wales, where is the detail, what discussions have taken place with the devolved Governments to date, what is the funding formula, will it be Barnettised, and, in short, where’s the beef?

James Brokenshire: As I have indicated, I do want towns in Scotland to be able to benefit from this. We are continuing our discussions on finalising the additional funding to go to Scotland and Wales to reflect the new funding for England, and, as I have also indicated, I will update the House.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: With Seaborne Freight, with the channel tunnel fiasco, with no idea for Scotland, with no idea for Wales—maybe Northern Ireland has had its cash, we don’t know—this is the UK at peak banana republic; it is make it up as you go along at the Dispatch Box thrown in with the expense of bidding and the patronage of doling out the money.
The Secretary of State has missed a trick: had he announced this over 14 years rather than seven, he could have said it was £3.2 billion rather than £1.6 billion. Either way, it works out at about £20 million a year for Scotland, and to make it worse we in the islands have been waiting a long time for our islands deal, and the UK Government do not know which Department is dealing with it—is it the Treasury, or the Scotland Office? The towns of Castlebay, Daliburgh, Lochboisdale, Balivanich, Lochmaddy, Tarbert and Stornoway could surely do with a good bit of this cash, and the crux here is that England is not bidding for this cash; England is getting this cash. And Scottish Tories, who have got the mushroom treatment, have to decide whether they are Unionists or submissionists who are doing what they are told. So the long and the short of this, is will this money be Barnettised? Will we see our fair share, or is this just peak, zenith banana republic coming from the Dispatch Box?

James Brokenshire: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman does not, it seems, have that sense of ambition that we have for Scotland through Brexit and beyond. I know that Members on his party’s Benches have a different perspective on Brexit, but I say to him that I do want the towns in his constituency to be able to benefit from that, and therefore while there is new funding coming for England, we are seeing that Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland benefit from that in the appropriate way. As I have indicated to him and other hon. Members, we will come back with the detail of that funding. I want Scotland to see the positive vision and sense that I have. Even if the hon. Gentleman is looking to extend this out for 14 years, we want to see the benefit sooner than that.

**Tax Avoidance, Evasion and Compliance**

7.53 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): With permission, I should like to make a statement on tax avoidance, evasion and compliance.

This Government take a balanced approach to the public finances, investing in our vital public services while getting our debt down and keeping taxes as low as possible, and part of that approach is that everybody must pay the tax that is properly due. The vast majority of taxpayers, from individuals and the smallest businesses to the largest companies, already pay their fair share. This Government recognise their duty to that compliant majority to build a fair and sustainable taxation system and, through that system, to make sure that those who try to avoid or evade their tax liabilities are held to account.

Our approach is working. At 5.7%, the tax gap is at a near-record low. The difference between the tax that should be paid to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and the actual tax that has been paid is at its joint lowest level in five years, thanks to HMRC’s sustained efforts to tackle non-compliance and to help customers get their tax affairs right first time.

HMRC tailors its approach to different taxpayers, subjecting the largest businesses and the wealthiest individuals to the greatest level of scrutiny, while using data and digital tools to help smaller and mid-sized businesses to get it right, with close attention on those where avoidance or evasion is suspected. We must make sure the tax system is not a barrier to setting up, running or growing a business, but we should never forget that the tax brought in by HMRC directly funds our vital public services.

I am proud of this Government’s success in this respect. Since 2010, we have introduced over 100 measures to tackle tax avoidance, evasion and other forms of non-compliance. Alongside this, HMRC’s compliance work has secured and protected £200 billion in tax revenue that would otherwise have gone unpaid. In addition, at Budget 2018 the Government announced a further 21 measures that together are forecast to raise around £2.1 billion by 2023-24. This success demonstrates the Government’s continued efforts to address tax avoidance, evasion and non-compliance in all its forms.

At the same time, the Government recognise that these efforts must be designed and targeted carefully. All HMRC powers, which are given by Parliament, must be accompanied by the necessary safeguards to ensure that they are used correctly. The Government will keep the tax administration framework under review, in consultation with interested external stakeholders, to ensure that it continues to strike the right balance between robustly challenging tax avoidance, evasion and other forms of deliberate non-compliance and treating all taxpayers fairly.

As part of our continuing efforts to reduce the gap between money owed and money paid, the Government have also set about reforming the rules that govern off-payroll working. These rules, known as IR35, were first introduced in 2000 to ensure people working through their own company, who, but for the existence of the company, would be taxed as employees, pay broadly the same tax and national insurance as other employees.
The rules do not affect the genuinely self-employed and the Government recognise the contribution that contractors make to business and to public services across the country. Our aim is simply to ensure that contractors who work through their own company pay the right tax.

However, evidence has suggested that these rules have been frequently misapplied, so contractors were incorrectly paying tax as though they were self-employed when they were actually acting as employees. It is right and fair that everyone must pay the tax that is due irrespective of the nature of their employment. We want a tax system that is simple and clear to use, so that businesses and individuals alike can understand what they owe and how and when to pay it.

In April 2017, the Government introduced new rules for public sector organisations that take on contractors through their own company. The reform means that public sector organisations are now responsible for deciding both whether the contractor is acting as an employee, and therefore within the rules, and ensuring the right amount of tax is paid.

I am pleased to report to the House that this has proved to be effective, with HMRC estimating that an additional £550 million has been raised in income tax and national insurance contributions in the first 12 months since the measure was introduced. However, non-compliance in the private sector remains a persistent and growing problem that, if left unchecked, will cost the taxpayer as much as £1.3 billion by 2022-23, according to the Government’s estimates.

In last year’s Budget, the Government announced that we will extend the reform of off-payroll working rules to the private sector from April 2020, and tomorrow we will publish a consultation to seek views on the detailed design of the reform to enable effective implementation. By changing the design of the off-payroll working rules, we are helping individuals working in this way to ensure that they are compliant with the existing legislation. For this reason, the Government’s focus will be on supporting organisations and businesses to apply the rules, rather than enforcing historical cases. Our aim is to provide individuals and businesses with greater certainty around how the off-payroll working rules will operate from April 2020 and the actions that individuals and businesses can take to prepare for the reform.

Our reforms to off-payroll working are just one of the ways in which this Government are ensuring that we have a tax system that is fit for the 21st century, and I commend this statement to the House.

7.59 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op):
The Opposition came to Parliament today prepared to debate, to amend and to scrutinise the Financial Services (Implementation of Legislation) Bill, and we did so in good faith, even though we were given just three hours to table amendments to the Bill last week, having been told on Wednesday afternoon that the remaining stages would be taken today. I should make it clear that the Bill had only come out of Committee the day before, on Tuesday, and that the business for this week was announced only last Thursday.

Let me be absolutely frank. The Bill has been pulled, and this statement scheduled instead, for one simple reason: the Government thought that they were going to lose. They have shown such contempt for Parliament today, and they are in such a state of chaos, that even the annunciator could not keep up with them this morning. This is not a statement from the Government on tax avoidance; it is a poor attempt to put up something that the Government can hide behind, because they are afraid to let Members of Parliament vote on the provisions of the Financial Services (Implementation of Legislation) Bill.

There were two main amendments to the Bill. The first would have prevented the Bill from legislating for a race to the bottom in regulatory standards if we were to crash out of the EU without a deal—something that the Government say they are already committed to. The second, standing in the names of my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), would have compelled the introduction of public registers of beneficial ownership in the Crown dependencies and reiterated their introduction in the overseas territories—something that the Government are already committed to doing. It is woeful and embarrassing for the Government to pull the business of the House today, to avoid Parliament having a say on those amendments, and to make this statement instead.

In relation to the substantive point on tax evasion that has led to this, I know that the Crown dependencies have a difference of opinion with this Parliament on the merits of public registers of beneficial ownership, but I believe that there is a majority view in Parliament that public registers provide for greater transparency than the existing data-sharing protocols between ourselves and the Crown dependencies provide for. Public scrutiny would provide for analysis of suspicious patterns of behaviour, and it would disclose inconsistencies in supposedly factual information and reveal wrongdoing by people who might not already be the subject of official law enforcement action. Around the world, such information getting into the public domain has been essential to exposing tax evasion and corruption, from the laundromat scandal to the Panama papers, and the public want to see action.

In relation to what the Minister has said today, all I can ask him is whether his reference to not enforcing historic cases is code for the Government not proceeding with the 2019 loan charge? His words suggested that they might not be proceeding, but he did not really say one way or another. If the answer is that they are not proceeding, I am not really sure, with all due respect to the Minister, why he needed to make a statement today at all.

Let me return to the main point. If we had debated the Financial Services (Implementation of Legislation) Bill today, I had intended to start with a genuine word of solidarity with my opposite number, the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, who is also the MP for Salisbury, because it is exactly a year since the appalling attack in his constituency that featured chemical weapons. I still want to take this opportunity to express our support and solidarity with him and the people of his constituency. I mention this now because the House has united on a cross-party basis to push for new laws in this area precisely because transparency in overseas jurisdictions has become an issue of national security for us in the UK. We cannot, and should not,
tolerate those who threaten the safety of our people being able to hold major assets in the UK through complex and opaque financial arrangements.

In the light of that, the Government’s words today are simply not good enough. If there is consensus in this House that action must be taken now, how can the Government deny us the chance not only to vote for further action but to vote to reaffirm the action that we have already passed through the House of Commons? Real action on tax avoidance, transparency and money laundering is well overdue, and if the Government cannot bring themselves to take that action, they should at least stop preventing other Members of Parliament from getting on with the job.

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his reply. He spent some time focusing on the legislation that was due to come before the House this evening. Some amendments have been tabled, particularly the second one to which he referred, that could have significant constitutional ramifications for our Crown dependencies and overseas territories. For that reason, and given that the amendments were tabled only last Thursday, it is only right that we should have time to consider these important matters. They are not directly Treasury matters; they are more a matter for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Justice.

The hon. Gentleman refers to wanting to see public registers of beneficial ownership of companies, but he neglected to mention that we have already introduced these in respect of UK companies. That came in in 2016, and that database has been accessed in excess of 2 billion times. He mentioned that we have already made commitments to work with the overseas territories to bring in those measures by 2023. He asked me specifically what the meaning was, in the context of IR35, of focusing particularly on future compliance rather than on the history of the businesses that would be in scope of this measure. This is simply a clear indication that this is not about trawling through previous activities. It is about looking to the future and ensuring that we take a fair, proportionate and reasonable approach to IR35 as it goes into the private sector.

The hon. Gentleman asks me whether there were any implications for the loan charge. I know that people often conflate IR35 and the loan charge in relation to disguised remuneration, but as he will appreciate, they are entirely different things. There is no implication in any element of my statement on any change in respect of the loan charge.

The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, in relation to our national security, about the importance of general transparency in business and tax affairs internationally. I remind him that this Government and this country have been at the forefront of the base erosion and profit-shifting project with the OECD and that it is this country that has helped to drive our common reporting standards, which provide information across hundreds of overseas tax jurisdictions. With that, I will conclude, because I think that I have addressed the points that the hon. Gentleman has raised.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): The Minister, whom I respect greatly, has been handed an enormous hospital pass today, although perhaps not as great as the one handed to the Secretary of State for Health earlier, when he had to justify the conduct of one of his Cabinet colleagues. I should like to ask the Minister to build on what the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), the shadow Minister, was saying. The Minister said in his statement that “the Government’s focus will be on supporting organisations and businesses to apply the rules, rather than enforcing historical cases.”

Have the Government learned from the 2019 loan charge cases, where people are very concerned about the importance of historic cases rather than looking forward? Is the Minister saying that these changes will be done differently from what we see happening under the loan charge?

Mel Stride: I thank my right hon. Friend for her questions. To reiterate, there is no connection between the loan charge and IR35; they are two distinctly different aspects of Government taxation policy. The purpose of my statement, in making it clear that we will not be actively or aggressively looking at previous activities in this area, was to show that we recognise that we need to get this right and that we need to support employers and contractors as we go through this process. That is the approach that we will take.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): We should have been debating the Financial Services (Implementation of Legislation) Bill this evening, but the UK Government are clearly feart. Can the Minister tell us when the Bill will return to the House? We were told that it was vital, urgent and necessary in the event of a no-deal Brexit, yet today we find that that urgency has evaporated. The statement today is nothing but a fig leaf to cover the embarrassment that the UK Government feel over the amendment tabled by the right hon. Members for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge). The Government should have acted on this after the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018, but on public registers of beneficial ownership, they have taken their lead from the Prime Minister and kicked the can down the road to 2023.

On IR35 and the loan charge, what assessment has the Minister made of how many people were forced into the system by their employers and what action has been taken by the employers involved in those cases? How many people were separate from that and perhaps knowingly used the system to avoid tax? It seems to me that they are two separate classes of people who should be recognised and treated differently as we go forward.

On compliance and enforcement, this Government have a poor record because they have already closed HMRC offices in Scotland, the local knowledge of which played a vital and valuable role in enforcement, ensuring no avoidance or evasion and enforcing compliance. My hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) has asked this before, but will the Minister put the plans to close the HMRC office in that constituency on hold because it plays a vital role in the tax avoidance, evasion and compliance regime?

Finally, will the Minister act to make Companies House part of the anti-money laundering regime, which would close a huge loophole in the system that allows people to register companies falsely? Will he take action on Scottish limited partnerships, which are still allowing
people to hide money and move it around? The last time I asked about SLPs, thousands of people still had not registered as a person of significant control but had not been fined. Does he not have an interest, as a Treasury minister, in having that significant amount of money in the Treasury coffers rather than going unpaid?

**Mel Stride** (Con): The hon. Lady asks about when today’s business will return to the House. That will be a matter for the business managers and the usual channels in the usual way. She asks about the loan charge and, specifically, about those who would be impacted by it, and I can tell her that, of the £1 billion that has been received by HMRC via pre-loan charge settlements, some 85% of those settlements by value came from companies, rather than from individuals. HMRC will go for companies in the first instance.

The hon. Lady raises the issue of HMRC offices up and down the country. We are going through a transformation programme, as she will know, reducing the number of offices from 170, some of which had fewer than 10 staff, to produce 13 state-of-the-art hubs that will move our tax authorities into the 21st century, and so much more can be done through analysis, computers and intelligent interventions. I was privileged last week to visit our new office in Bristol, which will be the hub for the south-west of England. It is a truly stunning building that will house a state-of-the-art approach to tax collection.

The hon. Lady mentions Scottish limited partnerships and urges the Government to act. She will know that we have already taken action in that respect. The main point remains that we have been successful in keeping our tax gap as one of the lowest in the world, safeguarding and protecting some £200 billion of tax, which, let us not forget, is there for a purpose. Taxes support our vital public services, our doctors, our nurses, our brave servicemen and women, and our police force. We need that money, and that is why I am proud of our achievements in that area.

**Robert Neill** (Con): My right hon. Friend is right to say that the best approach is to get things right for the future, rather than to overemphasise enforcement of the past, particularly when people may well have acted in good faith when they received professional advice. That takes me to the loan charge and I will press the Minister on that. The Government accepted a new clause to the Finance Bill that the House is considering and perfectly in order. However, that is not the same as saying that the amendment to the legislation that was considered and measured in that way. It is important that we allow time to ensure that we get these things right, not least because our Parliament is legislating for overseas territories. The short answer is that it is important that we allow time to ensure that we get these things right, not least because our Parliament is legislating on behalf of another jurisdiction—albeit one that is closely related to ourselves. It is important that we are considered and measured in that way.

The right hon. Lady’s second question relates to the Crown dependencies. She made the quite legitimate point that the amendment to the legislation that was due to go through this afternoon was indeed in scope and in order. However, that is not the same as saying that that contradicts my earlier point that that particular amendment would have considerable and significant constitutional ramifications for our Crown dependencies. For that reason, as I stated earlier, the Government feel that it is important to reflect carefully upon that before we come back with the legislation in due course.

**Nigel Mills** (Con): I welcome the statement before us—if not its existence, at least its content. The Minister says that he wants to support individuals. Can he create a mechanism whereby someone can have their standard contract preceeded by HMRC so that, if they engage with half a dozen customers a year, they will not get half a dozen different treatments chosen by those companies when they put the contract through their tool, or something similar?

**Mel Stride** (Con): The issue of ensuring that we make it as simple as possible for employers to be able to assess the employment status of employees or contractors providing
services is extremely important. It is central to the consultation that I have announced will open tomorrow and run for several weeks, and I urge my hon. Friend to contribute to it with his specific idea.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Can the Minister explain why, on a day when they pulled business to avoid defeat on an amendment that could have meant the wealthiest businesses paid millions of pounds in tax, the Government feel it is acceptable to clamp down on ordinary families for national insurance and not pursue widespread, large-scale tax avoidance?

Mel Stride: On the first part of the hon. Lady’s question, I think I have already answered why we decided not to go ahead with the legislation today. On clamping down on national insurance issues, I am not entirely sure to what she is specifically referring. If she would like to have a word with me after this statement, I would be happy to have a look at it.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): May I accuse the Minister directly of encouraging a very large number of people to avoid tax? Is it not the case that, in 2010, when the Conservatives came into government, low-paid people had to earn only £6,500 a year before they paid income tax, but from next month the income tax threshold will be £12,500? May I accuse him of taking millions of people out of income tax altogether? Is not the fundamental truth that, if tax rates are lowered, tax take is increased by encouraging economic growth, giving us all more money to spend on public services?

Mel Stride: I thank my hon. Friend, and I take it on the chin. I am bang to rights. I and this Government are extremely proud of that fact.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Is not the Government’s decision to pull the Financial Services (Implementation of Legislation) Bill in the face of the amendment on public registers of beneficial ownership, tabled by my formidable right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), reflective of their entire approach to the wider issue? Can the Minister confirm when the Government will finally take decisive action on extending corporate liability for economic crime? Their call for evidence closed two years ago and we are still waiting for a response.

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady will know that this Government have an exemplary record when it comes to clamping down on tax avoidance, evasion and non-compliance, including overseas. We have been at the vanguard of the base erosion and profit shifting project, and in 2015 we brought in the diverted profits tax, which has already saved some £700 million. We are very active in this space and I refer her to my earlier answer on why we have delayed the legislation today.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I echo the words of the Chairs of the Treasury Committee and the Select Committee on Justice. The Minister’s words that the Government will not focus on enforcing historical IR35 cases will stick in the gullet of those, like my constituents, who are sick with anxiety at facing huge bills of over £100,000 relating to the loan charge. These are not affluent people: they are businesspeople who have ploughed everything they have into their business and into employing local people. Does the Minister understand just how stressful this is when they have not even received their settlement amount from the Inland Revenue after the date, at the end of February, by which they were promised it?

Mel Stride: It is very important for us to be extremely clear as to what disguised remuneration is all about. It is a situation where I, as an employer, instead of paying an employee in the normal manner, on which basis PAYE would be due—that would be income tax, employee’s national insurance and employer’s national insurance—I say to the employee, “Look, we’ll do it a different way. I’ll send some money out, typically into a trust in a low-tax or no-tax overseas jurisdiction. That money will then come back into the United Kingdom disguised as a loan”—not a real loan, as the hon. Lady and I would recognise, but one where there is no expectation that it will be repaid—“and, as a consequence because it is treated as a loan and not earnings, it attracts no tax at all.” This Government do not believe that is right.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Clause 95 of the Finance Bill 2019, which the Government accepted on Report, agreed a review of the loan charge. I have met constituents. They are ordinary folk who, when they were working for particular people, were told that this was the arrangement they had to make. They are now suffering huge penalties, although they are still not clear exactly what those penalties are because HMRC keeps changing the rules. Following the question of the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), will there be a proper independent review that reports by 30 March and allows time before these things come in? I like the Minister a lot and I think he is a good Minister, but what he just said suggests that the Government have already determined the outcome of that review, which is not very helpful.

Mel Stride: I am sorry if the hon. Gentleman formed that opinion. We are certainly not going to prejudge any review on any aspect of tax, whatever it may be. I gently say to him, and to those who got involved in these schemes, that by and large when something looks too good to be true, it is too good to be true. Where hon. Members refer to very large demands for tax, we are, of necessity, looking at situations where very large amounts of money went through tax avoidance schemes. We have had debates in this House in which Members have raised tax demands, on behalf of their constituents, of up to £900,000. In those circumstances, about £2 million-worth of income would need to go through one of those schemes in order to result in an unpaid tax bill of that magnitude.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The Minister needs to clarify whether he is just writing a report or whether he will genuinely do a serious review. He says that the bulk of the loan charge tax by volume
has already been collected. However, 50,000 ordinary, hard-working people are in despair and living in limbo, waiting to know whether the tax returns they put to bed years ago are to be reopened.

I am the vice-chair of the all-party loan charge group, and last week we heard from the family of a man who committed suicide over a small amount. It was the shame and fear that he would go to prison that sent him over the edge. The Sunday Telegraph has reported on a leaked HMRC letter from 2011 that clearly shows that it knew it was out of time for pursuing these cases back then, so will the Financial Secretary now admit that the real reason for the loan charge is HMRC’s failure to act when it was legally entitled to do so and that that is no good reason to undermine the rule of law by retrospectively rewriting the rules?

Mel Stride: May I correct one thing the hon. Lady said? She said I suggested that the bulk of the money due under the disguised remuneration measures has already been collected, but I am pretty certain I said that, of the £1 billion that has been collected thus far, some 85% has come from companies, as opposed to individuals. HMRC will go for the company before the individual. We have to get back to the reasons for this charge, which I have just set out. As for whether it is retrospective as the hon. Lady says, I can assure her that there has been no time in our history as a taxing nation as this kind of structure—this kind of contrived arrangement, which is set up simply for the avoidance of taxation—has ever fallen appropriately within our tax code. It has never been right. These schemes have been taken through the courts, not just the general courts, but the Supreme Court, over a number of years and they have always been found to be defective and not to work.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The Government’s decision to pull tonight’s vote on the remaining stages of the Financial Services (Implementation of Legislation) Bill, which would allow the UK to continue to implement EU rules, because they feared a defeat on the cross-party amendment on the introduction of beneficial ownership registers in Crown dependencies by 2020 is truly shocking. Does the Minister think that pulling that vote will dispel or heighten the concerns of the general public about the general chaos at the heart of this Government, which we are currently enduring, a mere three weeks from Brexit?

Mel Stride: No, it certainly will not heighten any sense that the public may or may not have of chaos. What it will do is give the Government the time to reflect upon what has emerged as an extremely important constitutional matter, in order to take a measured and careful approach to our response, and of course the legislation will come back to the House in due course.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his statement. Since the last time this matter was raised in the House, what has he done to close the loophole that has allowed big business to avoid paying the appropriate tax? Big business should not be trying to avoid paying tax; it should be paying its just taxes and doing it cheerfully.

Mel Stride: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman when he says that big businesses should be paying their fair share of tax, which is why half of the largest companies at any one time in the UK are being looked at closely or investigated by HMRC. That is not to say that they are doing anything wrong, but it is to indicate that we and HMRC take looking into the tax affairs of large companies extremely seriously. He will be aware of the measures we have brought forward in various Finance Bills specifically aimed at large companies, be it the legislation that has come out of the OECD BEPS—base erosion and profit shifting—project or the diverted profits tax measures of 2015. We do take this very seriously. We are a world leader at bringing in taxation, not least from large companies.
Points of Order

8.31 pm

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Tonight, a programme is going to be broadcast on national television—an advance screening is already taking place for Members in Committee Room 10 upstairs—that looks behind threats received online by Members of Parliament from across this House in relation to Brexit. My hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) and I have co-operated with and appear in this documentary. I know we are grateful to the police and all the authorities for their responses and for the prosecutions that have been launched after those threats, but this is systematic intimidation and influencing of the votes that MPs cast in this House. Next week, we expect to have further key Brexit votes. Will you help us to ensure that this threat to our democracy and our safety is to be taken seriously and is to be challenged at all times?

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the right hon. Lady both for this immensely serious point of order and for her characteristic courtesy in giving me advance notice of her intention to raise it. The short answer, though it warrants a fuller response, is that I will do everything in my power, sitting in this Chair, to uphold and champion not merely the right but the duty of every Member of this House to do what he or she thinks is right for the country. I am sorry to say that there has in recent times been a burgeoning phenomenon of people who hold a particular view, often rather an extreme one, simply not seeming to be able to imagine that anyone can legitimately hold a view that diverges from their own. This is very different from straightforward political disagreement. What seems to have happened is that people who violently disapprove of the opinion of a Member of Parliament think it is somehow proper to write in quite the most horrific and obnoxious terms, to post blogs on the matter, to tweet in the most offensive terms and in person either to threaten or, worse still, to inflict violence.

With the help of the House authorities, conscientious reporting to the police and, above all, effective action by the police, two things are obviously necessary. The first is that such people should be brought to book and made to realise that that behaviour is not acceptable. The second is that Members, as a result, should feel that proper safety net around them, to which anybody is entitled. However, the importance of free expression in our democracy and our safety is to be taken seriously and is to be challenged at all times.

Secondly—I hope this reinforces the right hon. Lady’s collective and cross-party spirit on this matter—an attack on one Member has to be viewed as an attack on us all and on our democratic principles. Someone who is not currently in the line of fire has a responsibility to realise that he or she could be at any time. An attack on or threat to the right hon. Lady is frankly an attack on and a threat to every single one of us.

If the House of Commons, as one of the two Houses of Parliament and the elected House, cannot do what it thinks is right, that would be the death of democracy. None of us in this House is going to allow the bigoted extremists, who do not just disagree with a person but want to trash that person’s motives, to win. It simply must not, cannot and will not happen. I applaud the right hon. Lady and her colleagues across the House and in several different parties for their courage and persistence in speaking up and out about this matter. I wish to associate myself both with what she said and with the actions she has undertaken.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your advice as to how Members of this House might be able to debate the allocation of MPs’ pay and their staff budgets. Last Thursday, the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority announced an inflation-busting 2.7% pay rise for Members of this House; however, our staff budgets are set to rise by a much more modest and below-inflation 1.5%. Some 200 MPs have already signed a letter expressing disappointment that we may not be able to grant staff the pay rise that they deserve, and I am aware that another letter is being circulated among staff.

I understand that the Leader of the House, as a member of the Speaker’s Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, would be the most appropriate member of the Government to respond to a debate on this matter. However, Members are unable to apply to the Leader of the House for Westminster Hall or Adjournment debates, so those avenues are not open to us. I note that the changes are set to take effect at the end of the month, so any advice that you can offer on this pressing matter, which is clearly a concern to many Members, would be greatly appreciated, Sir.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for giving me notice that she wished to raise this matter, which I know is of concern to many Members; indeed, I think the feeling is widespread across the House. I am sympathetic to the case, which the hon. Lady makes, that Members ought to be able to debate this matter. Although the Leader of the House is not on the usual rota for Westminster Hall debates, there is no reason of principle why Members should not apply for debates on subjects within their ministerial responsibility. In other words: where there’s a will, there’s a way. I hope the hon. Lady will understand that I have not had the opportunity to discuss this matter with the Leader of the House, but I have no reason to think that she will not be receptive to these points, and I very much hope that a resolution can be reached.
Decisions on MPs’ pay and expenses are, of course, made by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority. It is called the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority because its decisions are independently made—indeed, independently of both Government and Parliament. For that reason, the matter does not formally fall within the responsibilities of Ministers. However, I would argue that, with a degree of flexibility and sensitivity to colleagues’ concerns, that fact should not preclude applications for a debate either via the Table Office in the usual way, or, alternatively, via the Backbench Business Committee. The Leader of the House has some role in deciding on the date of Backbench Business Committee days, and that is quite a germane point in this context. The hon. Lady can also discuss the matter with the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, which, I rather imagine if she is keen on this idea, she will speedily do.

Finally, the Table Office can offer the hon. Lady advice on the options, so if she is asking me whether there is a recourse to facilitate debate, the answer is that there is. With her legendary ingenuity and persistence, I feel sure that salvation will be found.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab) rose—

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP) rose—

Mr Speaker: I am coming to the hon. Gentleman. It would be a pity to squander him too early.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last Monday, I was advised that the Department for Work and Pensions intends to implement the asks in my Food Insecurity Bill, which is an important step towards ending the devastating levels of UK hunger. I was, however, notified of this via an outside organisation. On Wednesday last week, the news was confirmed by an anonymous DWP spokesperson via an article in The Guardian newspaper. Although I am of course delighted that the Government have eventually listened to me and the 159 MPs across this House who supported my Bill, I am a little bit put out that they did not feel it necessary to contact me directly, worse still to make no written or oral statement to this House on such an important matter.

Can you advise me, please, Mr Speaker, if there has been a change in practice whereby Secretaries of State and Ministers are no longer required to give updates to this House on important policy developments?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for giving me notice that she wished to raise this matter. The short answer is no, there has been no change in that requirement. The way in which the requirement is interpreted varies from one Department to another, and sometimes even from one Minister to another. What I mean by that is that it is not always absolutely unarguably the case that an oral statement is required; it can be a matter of discretion, and in some instances a Minister will feel that a written statement suffices.

However, what I am concerned about here is less the question of whether an oral statement rather than a written is required, or a written rather an oral will suffice, and rather with the matter of courtesy. There is some concern that the courtesies are observed in this place inconsistently, and that saddens me. There are many members of the Government Front Bench—I am looking at one in the Financial Secretary—who, in my experience, are unfailingly courteous and do see it as their duty to keep others informed, and that, I think, is good not only for their parliamentary reputations but for the House. In other instances, such courtesies do not seem to be observed. I would have thought that, just on a human level, if the hon. Lady has taken a very key and leading role in this matter, it really would require very little forethought and modest consideration to notify her. I am sorry that that did not happen.

I cannot say I know exactly what process was followed, or what error in thinking caused this lapse, but it is disappointing. What I say to the hon. Lady is this: Ministers are expected to announce important policy changes to this House. It is unsatisfactory that she has not been directly informed of developments that concern her Food Insecurity Bill. I trust that this point has been noted on the Treasury Bench and that it will conveyed to the relevant Ministers. I hope that that is helpful.

David Linden: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On Friday, the director of a business in my constituency attended my advice surgery to complain that the company’s visa sponsorship licence had been unilaterally revoked by the Home Office, and that two members of staff had had their permission to work withdrawn. That has caused significant disruption to a company that is already up to its neck in post-Brexit planning.

To add insult to injury, the Home Office then somewhat cruelly implied that it suspected that the two individuals in question do not actually work for the firm, which is as offensive as it is baseless, not least because they have worked for the company for several years and are an integral part of the team. The company also provided the Home Office with countless items of evidence as proof of work. Moreover, when I visited the warehouse this morning, alongside local MSP Ivan McKee, I saw with my own eyes where those members of staff worked, and that the work is now literally piling up on their desks.

Immediately after my Friday surgery, I established contact with the Immigration Minister’s office to request the hon. Lady’s personal intervention. I firmly believe that this is a case more of cock-up than of conspiracy, but I would be grateful for your guidance on how I may place details of the case on the record. Mr Speaker. In the event that the Minister does not resolve this timeously, can you advise what further mechanisms might be open to me to resolve this sorry saga, which is adversely impacting an otherwise perfectly functioning business in my constituency?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice of his wish to raise the matter. He has to some extent achieved his own salvation by putting his concerns very firmly on the record. I say in the gentlest possible spirit to the hon. Gentleman, who is a most conscientious parliamentary, that he could not be accused of excluding any matter of any potential importance at any time from the summary. My case that he has just articulated to the House. He has made his point comprehensively—we are grateful to him for doing so—and, as a consequence, put his concerns on the record to be studied by others.

I note that the hon. Gentleman has already been in contact with the office of the relevant Minister, and he did ask about redress or resolution. If that contact does not lead to a satisfactory resolution, there are a number
of avenues open to him, including tabling questions, and indeed potentially seeking an Adjournment debate—a matter in which I have some modest, but I hope helpful, role myself to play. I suggest that he seeks the advice of the Table Office on the options. Knowing him as I do, I feel sure that his journey to the Table Office will be made with dispatch.

FINANCIAL SERVICES (IMPLEMENTATION OF LEGISLATION) BILL [LORDS]

Bill to be considered tomorrow.

8.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Justin Tomlinson): I beg to move,

That the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 30 January, be approved.

In my view, the provisions in the order are compatible with the European convention on human rights. The order reflects the Government’s continuing commitment to increase the basic and full rate of the new state pension by the triple lock, to increase the pension credit standard minimum guarantee in line with earnings, and to increase carer’s benefits, and benefits intended to meet additional disability needs, in line with prices.

The Government’s commitment to the triple lock means that the basic state pension will continue to be uprated by the highest of rises in earnings, rises in prices or 2.5%. The triple lock has been an invaluable tool in combating pensioner poverty, and keeping it in place gives pensioners the financial security and certainty that they deserve. This year the increase in earnings was the highest of the triple lock figures. As a result, the basic state pension will increase by 2.6% to £129.20 a week for a single person. Consequently, from April this year the basic state pension will be over £1,600 a year higher than it was in April 2010. We estimate that the basic state pension will be around 18.4% of average earnings, which is one of the highest levels relative to earnings for over two decades.

Three years ago, the Government introduced the new state pension, which provides a transparent and sustainable foundation for private saving and retirement planning for people reaching state pension age on or after 6 April 2016. We have also committed to increase the full rate of the state pension by the triple lock. As such, from April 2019 the full rate of the state pension will increase to £168.60 a week—about 24% of average earnings.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): If the Minister will not say this, may I? That increase does not go to half our overseas pensioners, including those in South Africa, Canada and Australia and other places—50 countries around the world. Does he agree that it is about time we considered that?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend, who has campaigned tirelessly on this issue. It has been the case for some 70 years that we do not uprate those pensions, and at this stage there are no plans to make any changes to that.

On the additional state pension, this year the state earnings-related pension scheme and the other state second pensions, as well as protected payments in the new state pension, will rise by 2.4% in line with prices. With pension credit, we are continuing to take steps to protect the poorest pensioners, including through the pension credit standard minimum guarantee—the means-tested threshold below which pensioner incomes should not fall. That will rise by 2.6% in line with average earnings. From April 2019, the single person threshold of this safety-net benefit will rise to £160.25—over £1,800 a year higher than it was in 2010.
Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What assessment have the Government made of the changes to pension credit that will come in in May this year, making it unavailable to people whose partner is under 65? How many more pensioners will be driven into poverty as a result?

Justin Tomlinson: There are two elements to that. First, it depends on individual circumstances and the impact of factors such as different arrangements in whether people are working, their caring responsibilities, and their health conditions. Secondly, it is about the principle of fairness, in that those of working age should not be accessing pension-related benefits. We should not be taking people of working age out of the workplace. Pensioner poverty continues to stand at one of the lowest rates since comparable records began, and we intend to keep it that way.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Justin Tomlinson: I will come back to the hon. Lady.

Turning to universal credit, in the 2018 autumn Budget statement the Chancellor announced additional assistance for those on universal credit. As such, the universal credit work allowance will increase by £1,000 after they have been increased by prices, helping 2.4 million working families. This measure raises the amount someone can earn before their universal credit payment is reduced and directs additional support to some of the most vulnerable low-paid working families.

Finally, let me turn to disability benefits. This year the Government will continue to make sure that carers and people who face additional costs as a result of their disability will get the additional support they need.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I have to ask the Minister: is that it? We are in the middle of a benefits freeze that is seeing family poverty rise—is that not right?

Justin Tomlinson: As I have set out before, as the economy has continued to grow, we have been able to share the proceeds of growth to support some of the most vulnerable in society. That has seen increases to the income tax threshold, which will reach £12,500 this year, taking 4 million of the lowest earners out of paying any income tax at all. We are also seeing significant additional support for those with children. Whereas spending on childcare was £4 billion in 2010, it will be £6 billion by 2020—a 50% increase as part of our doubling of free childcare support, particularly helping lone parents who seek to take advantage of the record employment in all regions.

Alison McGovern: I thank the Minister for giving way again. He knows as well as I do that none of the figures he has just announced add up to the £12 billion of welfare cuts previously announced in this House by George Osborne. By the end of the benefit freeze and the other measures that the Government have introduced, children in poverty in this country will be worse off—is that not right?

Justin Tomlinson: But we know from announcements in the last two Budgets that spending on working-age benefits will be £2 billion higher than it would have been under the legacy benefits. That is why we now see 300,000 fewer children in absolute poverty, as we continue to target support at the most vulnerable in society.

Ruth George: Will the Minister give way?

Justin Tomlinson: I am going to make some progress.

In addition, the carer and disability premiums paid with pension credit and working-age benefits, the employment and support allowance support component and the limited capability for work and work-related activity elements of universal credit will increase by 2.4%. Those increases will ensure that our welfare system continues to provide the most support for the people who need it.

In conclusion, in this order the Government propose to spend an extra £3.7 billion in 2019-20 on increasing benefit and pension rates. With this spending, we are upholding our commitment to the country’s pensioners by maintaining the triple lock, helping the poorest pensioners who count on pension credit, ensuring that working people can earn more before their universal credit payment is reduced and providing essential support to disabled people and carers. I commend this order to the House.

8.57 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): This uprating order increases a range of social security entitlements. However, it does not uprate those included in the Government’s freeze to working-age benefits enacted in the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016—a freeze that is causing real hardship to some of the poorest people in our country. The Minister set out the range of benefits to be uprated in line with the consumer prices index. The order also increases the state pension in line
with the triple lock—a measure that the Opposition fully support—and increases universal credit work allowances by £1,000, in line with the announcement in the last autumn Budget.

While we welcome measures to increase those payments, we are deeply concerned that most working-age benefits remain frozen. The fact is that austerity continues under this Government, and it is pushing individuals, families and children into poverty. This order fails to uprate a long list of social security benefits: child benefit, jobseeker’s allowance, employment and support allowance, income support, housing benefit, local housing allowance rates, child tax credit, working tax credit and the equivalent elements in universal credit. None of those are uprated by this order.

Let us think for a moment about who that failure affects. It is the person who has just lost their job after working for 20 years in the same firm. It is the parents struggling to feed their children. It is the sick or disabled person who is looking for work. These are vital social security payments that should lift people out of poverty and ensure that they do not become destitute.

Ruth George: I thank my hon. Friend for being prepared to give way to me, which the Minister was not. Does she agree that the freeze on housing benefit and local housing allowance is driving not only people of working age but more pensioners into poverty? Contrary to what the Government claim, pensioner poverty has risen by 0.3 million, and we are seeing more and more elderly people who have to rent houses suffering because of it.

Margaret Greenwood: My hon. Friend makes an absolutely pertinent point, and she does so with her usual alacrity and attention to detail.

These vital social security payments should lift people out of poverty and ensure that they do not become destitute, but under this Government that aim is not being met. Last year, research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that more than 1.5 million have experienced destitution in the UK, and the social security freeze is a key reason for that. To put this in perspective, destitution in this context—[Interruption.] Yes, destitution. I do not know why the Whip on the Government Front Bench finds destitution such a matter for mirth.

The Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty’s Treasury (Craig Whittaker): You don’t know the meaning of the word.

Margaret Greenwood: Well, let me explain. In this context, destitution means that a person has lacked two or more of the six essentials in the last month—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order.

Margaret Greenwood: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

To put this in perspective, destitution in this context means that a person has lacked two or more of the six essentials in the last month—shelter, food, heating, lighting, clothing and basic toiletries. It is truly shocking that 1.5 million are going without basic essentials in modern Britain.

The Social Metrics Commission, whose members are drawn from the left and the right of the political spectrum, has found that 14.2 million people in the UK are in poverty, including over 4 million children. More than one in 10 of the UK population live in persistent poverty. This is a shocking indictment of a country that has the fifth biggest economy in the world.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Ind): I want to put on the record that I have visited some of the poorest parts of the country in recent weeks with the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), and I can confirm that I have seen this destitution with my own eyes. I have spoken to individuals who have literally £5 a week to live on for a variety of reasons, including their inability to access universal credit, but the overriding fact is that people can no longer afford to live on the subsistence level that universal credit and working-age benefits are set at—they cannot.

Margaret Greenwood: I thank the hon. Lady for making the point so powerfully.

The benefit freeze increases poverty. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the freeze is set to drive almost 500,000 more people into poverty by 2020. In 2018, a couple with children claiming universal credit were up to £500 worse off, and a lone parent with children was up to £400 worse off, due to the benefit freeze. The JRF says that the freeze is the single biggest policy driver behind rising poverty levels. Before the freeze was introduced in the Welfare Reform and Work Act, working-age benefits were capped at 1%, yet living costs are rising. In the 12 months to September last year, prices grew by 2.4%, according to the CPI inflation measure. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation says that between the introduction of the benefits freeze in April 2016 and November 2018, the annual cost of living for people on low incomes rose by £900.

Rising living costs and frozen social security mean that the value of benefits is increasingly inadequate to protect people from poverty. A recent report by the National Audit Office shows how the real value of the basic rate of jobseeker’s allowance and income support has fallen nearly every year since 2012-13, and it is now below its value in 2009-10. Overall, the real cut to many benefits from the four-year freeze is over 6%. According to the Resolution Foundation, child benefit is now already worth less than it was in April 1999. Beyond a family’s first child, child benefit in April 2019 will be worth 14% less than it was when it was fully introduced in April 1979. This is compounded by the Conservatives’ broken economy: low wage growth and the rise of insecure and zero-hours contracts mean that incomes are failing to meet the rising cost of living.

Alison McGovern: Simply, child benefit is easy to claim and has wide support in society, so are not the statistics my hon. Friend has laid out absolutely terrible for working families?

Margaret Greenwood: My hon. Friend makes an absolutely pertinent point, and I thank her for it.
Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The hon. Lady has concerns about working-age benefits—we all understand that, and she is right to highlight them—but at the beginning of her speech, she spent about five seconds on the £3 billion extra going to pensioners. Does she recognise that never in our country’s history have we ever spent more on the state pension than now, and the average pensioner is getting £1,600 a year more now than they were when Labour left office?

Margaret Greenwood: I will come on to pensions further on in my speech, if the hon. Gentleman will wait for that.

Some 8 million people are in poverty and live in families where at least one person is working. According to Shelter, more than half of homeless families in England are in work. Under the Conservatives, having a job is not even a guarantee that someone can avoid homelessness. The benefit freeze cannot be seen in isolation. It is just one part of the Conservative austerity programme that has seen billions cut from public services around the country and taken the core out of our communities. The Conservatives have targeted social security with devastating cuts, taking vital support from poor and disabled people. According to figures produced by the Library, measures announced in the June 2010 Budget onwards are forecast to cut social security by £36 billion in 2020-21. Nearly £5 billion is forecast to be taken from disability benefits, including employment and support allowance and incapacity benefit; £4.6 billion from tax credits; and £3.4 billion from child benefit. These cuts have had a devastating impact on the incomes of millions of people. The freeze should be seen in the context of the chaotic roll-out of the Government’s failing flagship social security programme, universal credit.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the points that she is making, many of which will resonate with my constituents. Does she agree that in-work poverty is a modern-day scourge on British society, and it exposes the lie that if someone is willing to work hard and make their own money, man y of which will resonate with my constituents. I congratulate my hon. Friend on the points that she is making, many of which will resonate with my constituents.

Margaret Greenwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and there is a real sense of betrayal that that myth has been perpetrated by Government Members. It is clear that universal credit is not working. It is driving many people into poverty, debt and rent arrears. One of its key defects is the inbuilt and unrealistic five-week wait. Originally it was even worse—a six-week wait. It seems that that senseless policy was devised by the Government without any thought for how people are supposed to survive for five or six weeks without any payment at all. The Secretary of State herself has spoken of the link between universal credit and the significant rise in food bank use. Why then have the Government failed to tackle this issue and why do they offer people a loan, rather than solving the problem?

The Secretary of State has said that the benefits freeze will not be extended beyond next year, but families cannot afford another year of the freeze. Next year alone, the benefits freeze is expected to cut £1.5 billion from the value of working-age benefits. We have called on the Government repeatedly to end the benefits freeze. It is not too late for them to stop the freeze. Ending it a year early would lift 200,000 people out of poverty altogether and boost the incomes of 13.7 million people on low incomes by an average of £270. The Government might be reluctant to do that now because the next financial year is only weeks away. However, when there is a desire to get a short Bill through and general agreement that it is non-contentious, Parliament can move primary legislation along quickly. As we saw in the recent work and pensions estimates debate, there is a cross-party desire to remove the damaging benefits freeze.

Part of the Government’s concern might be that the passage of such a Bill would be slowed down by amendments, so we will lay down a challenge to them: if they introduce a short Bill to end the benefit freeze one year early, Labour would support it and do whatever is possible to ensure its smooth passage before the next financial year. Will the Government agree to this measure, which would take hundreds of thousands of people out of poverty?

The increase in universal credit work allowances was introduced after considerable pressure from the House and Labour Members in the autumn statement. We welcome the increase, but we question why the Government cut the work allowances in the first place only to partially reinstate them a few years later. The 2015 cuts to work allowances dealt a major blow to the work incentives of universal credit and took money out of the pockets of working families. According to the Resolution Foundation, the increase to work allowances announced in the autumn restores only half the original cut overall. There are no work allowances for single people and couples who do not have a disability. Will the Government revisit this decision?

Turning to the uprating of the state pension in line with the triple lock, we are pleased that the Government have kept to this, despite the Conservatives’ plan to scrap the triple lock, which they announced in their manifesto. Presumably, the pressure from Labour Members made them think about that again. The latest figures show that pensioner poverty, as my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) said, is rising again, with more than 300,000 additional pensioners living in poverty compared with 2012-13. That could be made worse by the news, slipped out on the eve of an all-important Brexit vote, that mixed-age couples will no longer be able to claim pension credit. They will instead be forced into making a universal credit claim, and some couples may lose as much as £7,000 a year as a result. Cumulatively, the cut amounts to £1 billion over the next five years. What assessment have the Government made of the effect this cut will have on pensioner poverty?

As the Government are still recklessly failing to rule out a no-deal Brexit, the threat of no deal and the effect it would have on the state pensions of UK citizens living abroad looms ever greater. As has been mentioned, the Government already withhold the pension uprating from pensioners living abroad in many countries outside the EU, an injustice Labour has pledged to reverse. In their no-deal planning, the Government have failed to commit to uprating the state pension across the EU beyond 2019-20. I have met pensioners who are very worried about this scenario and the effect it will have on
pensioner poverty abroad. People who previously moved to the EU did so on the understanding that their pensions would be uprated. Why will the Government not give assurances to protect UK pensioners living abroad, whatever the outcome of the Brexit negotiations? The Government have failed to address the financial hardship faced by millions of women born in the 1950s due to changes in pensions policy. Why, despite constant lobbying raising awareness of the issue, have the Government failed to take action? The Conservatives’ austerity agenda has inflicted real hardship on many of the poorest and most vulnerable people in our society. It has also drastically undermined our social security system.

We on the Labour Benches believe that we need a social security system that is valued as highly as our NHS and is there for any one of us should we need it. The Government are failing to deliver. If the Prime Minister was really serious about austerity being over, the Government should take action to tackle the rising poverty we are seeing throughout our country.

9.11 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): The greatest achievement of the modern capitalist system has been its ability to consistently deliver rising living standards across the globe. With higher living standards come longer lives, and that is absolutely something to be celebrated. Many of us can now look forward to living healthy and fulfilling lives into our 70s, 80s and, God forbid, possibly even beyond.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making a point about life expectancy. Is he not aware that recent figures suggest that life expectancy is now rolling backwards and that a good deal of that could well be attributed to Tory austerity?

Paul Masterton: I should point out that I spent 10 years as a pensions specialist before coming into this place. The hon. Lady is not actually correct. What has happened is that the increase in life expectancy is slowing down. That is not a UK-only phenomenon; it is happening right across the western world because of very large advances. It is not unreasonable or linked to austerity. Longer lives mean that there will be an increasing number of older people in our society; the proportion of people aged 85 and over is projected to double over the next 25 years.

Debbie Abrahams: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman has made an error. Public Health England published a report, alluded to by the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), that says exactly that life expectancy is flatlining for certain groups but going backwards for others and for certain regions. Not only that, it pointed the finger at austerity as the cause.

Paul Masterton: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention, but I would point out that that is not what the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) actually said.

I want to address the order, which delivers on the triple lock to the state pension and provides an extra £3 billion for pensioners in 2019-20, uprating in line with earnings at 2.6%. The UK has a system whereby today’s taxpayers pay for pensions currently in payment. When people are living healthier lives for longer, spending much greater proportions of our lives in retirement, that is both unfair and unsustainable. The figure has already grown from 26.5% in 1981 to 33.1% in 2013. In 2010, the basic state pension stood at 16% of average earnings. Thanks to the triple lock, it will soon be around one quarter of average earnings. That has contributed to pensioner poverty falling significantly in recent years and the Government can be rightly proud of that. By some estimates, typical pensioner households now have higher incomes than their working-age counterparts. The triple lock has therefore served its purpose, and I would argue that it cannot be maintained indefinitely.

Jim McMahon: Does the hon. Gentleman see that as a justification for removing the free TV licence?

Paul Masterton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point. I will come on to some of the questions about universal pensioner benefits in just a second.

As the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) mentioned, all Conservative MPs were elected on a manifesto commitment to replace the triple lock with a double lock of inflation and earnings from 2020. I believe that that was the right policy, and it would of course be more generous than the Cridland review’s recommendation of moving to a simple earnings link. Even this year, we are raising the state pension in line with earnings, because they have risen above the 2.5% floor the triple lock provides. The system should of course provide generous support for vulnerable pensioners, but that support should be properly targeted.

The current universal system means precious public funds are being spent on well-off pensioners. In fact, the richest one fifth of pensioners on average receive a higher weekly income from benefits, including the state pension, than the poorest one fifth. That would be a shocking statistic even without the context of strained public finances. If we are serious about addressing intergenerational unfairness, we must recognise the unfairness of allowing higher income pensioners, many of whom remain in very well-paid employment—for example, as MPs—to retain certain entitlements, while workers on an equivalent income lose their child benefit and their marriage allowance, to give just two examples.

We are building huge levels of intergenerational inequity in this country under the current system that the triple lock, having done what it was designed to do, will only continue to exacerbate. If we want to avoid increasing the burdens on younger workers to fund large transfers of wealth to better-off pensioners, issues around the triple lock and, although they are not in the scope of the measure today, universal benefits need to be addressed. Why are we increasing and providing these benefits to extremely wealthy individuals if it means having to freeze the entitlements for those who are in work and struggling to make ends meet?

I know that the political reality following the experience of the 2017 election meant that that manifesto commitment had to go and that that could easily lead the Conservative Party to conclude that it has had its fingers burnt on many of these issues and should steer clear of them in future, but that would be a betrayal of my generation and those to follow. While I, of course, support the
uprating order and particularly the increase to the UC work allowances, which many Government Members lobbied very hard for, I hope that the door is not being slammed shut on the grown-up discussion that we all need to have in the House about the triple lock and other universal pensioner benefits in the near future.

9.16 pm

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): As much as on one level I would love to say otherwise, with some reluctance I say that we will not oppose this statutory instrument this evening. However, just because we do not seek to block these paltry, parsimonious increases to some social security benefits, Government Members should not think for one moment that we think that these miserable, inflation-linked rises are in any way adequate or go far enough to assist those in our society who are in most need of help.

Alison Thewliss: Does my hon. Friend agree that the WASPI women are one such group who deserve a pay rise and deserve the money that they have paid in but have not received? Does he pay credit to the women who came to march in Govan a couple of weeks ago not just from Scotland, but from other parts of these islands?

Brendan O’Hara: I absolutely do. My hon. Friend and many other Opposition Members have been fantastic champions of the WASPI women. I pay tribute to the WASPI women—in my time as a Member of Parliament, I do not think that I have come across a more co-ordinated, invigorated group. Those who attended in Govan should be left in no doubt that we know that they have not gone away and that they will not go away until justice is done.

As far as the Scottish National party is concerned, the Government stand accused of deliberately widening the gaps in the social safety net. If they push on with the final year of the benefit freeze, they will do so in the full and certain knowledge that those gaps will get wider. As they widen, low-income families, children, the sick, the working poor, the unemployed, the vulnerable and disabled people will continue to fall through that net—the collateral damage in the Government’s ideological crusade to seek to balance their books on the backs of the weakest and poorest in society. I believe that, along with the catastrophic Brexit that we are about to face, entrenching poverty across the UK will be this Government’s legacy. I reiterate that these cuts are not a necessity. This is a political choice. These cuts are simply ideological.

Almost two years ago, the Prime Minister said famously, in response to a nurse who asked why she and her colleagues had not been given a pay rise, that “there isn’t a magic money tree that we can shake that suddenly provides for everything that people want”.

Really? No magic money tree? You could have fooled me, because as far as I can see, there always seems to be a magic money tree handy when the Prime Minister needs £1.6 billion to bribe English MPs to back her appalling Brexit deal. There always seems to be one when her Government need to find £1 billion to buy off the Democratic Unionist party in order to keep themselves in power. Of course, there is always a magic money tree around when the historically hopeless Transport Secretary needs to be bailed out when he—as we know he will—messes things up again. Perhaps a more accurate answer to that nurse would have been, “Of course there’s magic money tree but not for the likes of you and those others who need it most.” Perhaps an even more honest answer would have been, “Of course there’s a magic money tree, and you and the millions of people across the UK hammered by this Government for almost a decade are that money magic tree,” because the billions of pounds taken from the poorest and most vulnerable in our society have gone to bankroll much of the Government’s programme, and it has left deep wounds across many communities in the United Kingdom.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): As usual, the hon. Gentleman makes an impassioned speech—I admire the passion he brings to this debate—but the SNP are running away from their responsibilities for certain social security payments that it is within their power to take responsibility for. They cannot even begin to put their arms around the administration of those devolved responsibilities until 2024. When they talk in such impassioned terms, we have to match their words, sentiment and passion with the reality of the actions of the SNP Scottish Government, which are lacking in this significant area.

Brendan O’Hara: That is the sort of patent nonsense I have come to expect from Conservative Members. The Scottish Government have spent hundreds of millions of pounds in mitigating the worst excesses of this callous UK Government. The bedroom tax, universal credit and carer’s allowance have all been mitigated by the Scottish Government. However, I am sure the hon. Gentleman would agree that the Scottish Parliament is not a mitigation Chamber for this Government. As long as we are to be in this place and this Government control the vast majority of welfare legislation, this is the source of the problem. As responsibility for benefits gets to the Scottish Parliament, we will use it properly and in time, but my goodness I will take no lectures from the Conservative party about universal credit and welfare.

I reiterate the oft-made calls from the SNP Benches for the UK Government to end their deeply damaging and socially divisive benefits freeze. In the last three years alone, the value of benefits affected by the freeze has fallen by more than 6%, meaning that those who can afford it the least have been hardest hit. This is seen as one of the key drivers in pushing up the number of children living in poverty across the UK. Data from the Office for National Statistics shows the reality of the benefits freeze on something as simple as the cost of basic foodstuffs. In the past three years, when working age benefits have not increased at all, the reality facing families on benefits is that bread is now 11% dearer, sugar is 17% more expensive, whole milk is up 12%, tea and coffee are up 7½% and butter is up an incredible 23%. That is the price increase since 2016.

It goes without saying—or it should—that poorer families are hit hardest by economic shocks. The poverty premium means that what middle-income families may consider to be a small economic shock, such as a rise in the cost of bread or milk, has a much greater impact on those with smaller incomes who have less disposable income. The Social Metrics Commission report on poverty in the UK published last year found that 2.5 million people were living less than 10% above the poverty line. Relatively small changes in their circumstances could mean they easily fall below it.
Alison Thewliss: My hon. Friend is making some very good points about the cost of living. Is he aware that the UK Government’s cuts and their restricting of the child element of universal credit to the first two children in a family mean that a single mum with three kids working 16 hours on the Government’s pretend living wage will have to work 45 hours to make up the difference from the cuts?

Brendan O’Hara: I was aware of that. The statistics are shocking, as I will come on to shortly.

In this, its final and most punishing year, the benefits freeze will claw back nearly £4.5 billion. That is nearly £1 billion more than the amount for which the Government budgeted. Late last year, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation said that, by lifting the freeze a year early, the Government could take 200,000 out of poverty. Given the economic turmoil that is expected as a result of Brexit, the Government know that the quickest way in which they could get money to those who need it most would be simply to lift the freeze. It is not too late to do that. As we heard from the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), they could introduce primary legislation as soon as they wanted in order to remove the four-year freeze section from the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, and they could introduce a statutory instrument to uprate benefits ahead of April. Like the hon. Lady, I can guarantee the support of my right hon. and hon. Friends if the Government were to take that bold and imaginative step.

We said at the outset, back in 2015, that the imposition of a benefits freeze was morally reprehensible, but to continue that freeze in the face of the almost unprecedented economic uncertainty caused by Brexit would, in my opinion, be an unforgivable abuse of the weakest and the most vulnerable in our society. In his report of November 2018, the United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights wrote:

“Given the vast number of policies, programs and spending priorities that will need to be addressed over the next few years, and the major changes that will inevitably accompany them, it is the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of society who will be least able to cope and will take the biggest hit.”

Worryingly, he also wrote that, on the basis of his meeting with UK Government officials, “it was clear…that the impact of Brexit on people in poverty is an afterthought”.

If, back in 2015, the Government intended those receiving benefits to suffer the effects of austerity more than most, they have certainly succeeded. Recently published statistics from the Resolution Foundation make sobering reading. According to the foundation, basic support for jobseekers will be equivalent to 14.5% of average earnings in 2019-20, its lowest ever level. Only once since its introduction in 1979 has child benefit for a first child been lower, and for a family with two children, its value has never been lower.

We all know that the 2015 Budget contained some of the most punitive cuts in social security that this country has ever seen, which are now beginning to actively reverse previous reductions in child poverty. Today, in some of the poorest areas of the United Kingdom, child poverty rates are running at 50%. That is an unbelievable figure in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, although, sadly, it is all too believable in one of the most unequal countries in the developed world. According to Oxfam’s analysis of the 2016 Credit Suisse report, just 600,000 of the UK’s richest people are worth 20 times as much as the poorest 13 million combined.

It is predicted that, if the Government continue on the same path, 200,000 more children will be growing up in poverty by 2020. The Resolution Foundation has said that child poverty is projected to rise by a further 6% by 2024, which would mark a record high. I understand that the Government will soon publish some very damning child poverty statistics, but must we wait for those figures to come out before the Government start to listen to calls for them to change direction? According to the Child Poverty Action Group and the Institute for Public Policy Research, Government policy, particularly the two-child policy, will be responsible for pushing hundreds of thousands of children into poverty. When giving evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee in December 2018, CPAG said of the two-child policy:

“You could not design a better policy to increase child poverty than this one”.

Alison Thewliss: That is absolutely right. It is welcome that the Secretary of State rowed back on making the policy retrospective, but it will still have a huge impact on child poverty in the future. If it is unfair to some families, it should be deemed to be unfair to all of them, and the policy should go altogether.

Brendan O’Hara: Absolutely. I could not have put it better myself.

What the Government have created is a social security system that believes people can be punished out of poverty. They have created a system where benefits are fraught with the threat of sanctions, and where disability assessments are psychologically and physically distressing and involve an appeals system so complex and drawn out that they actively discourage claimants from accessing the support they are due.

This is not a system based on dignity or respect; it is a system where all too often compassion is the exception. This is a system deliberately designed to afford the individual claimant as little personal respect as possible, and a system deliberately designed to make the poorest and most vulnerable in our society pick up the tab for an increasingly incompetent Government as they desperately cling to power.

9.30 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara). I think it would be useful to reflect on the categories of claimant who will not be receiving this uprating. Among those who will not receive any additional support this year are people on child benefit, on jobseeker’s allowance, on employment and support allowance who are looking for work, on income support and on housing benefit. It will not affect local housing allowance rates, child tax credit, working tax credit and the majority of comparable elements of universal credit. These have all been subject to a four-year freeze, and before that they had two years of just a 1% uprating. The freeze since 2015 is equivalent to a 6.1% cut. So I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm the savings to the Exchequer for this year alone. Could he also confirm that 10.5 million households will have the equivalent of £150 less in support available to them?
We have already heard estimates of the impact on child poverty, but it is important to reflect on them again. The freeze of child benefit and the child element of universal credit will be responsible for pushing 200,000 more children into poverty by 2020. The Minister said at the beginning of this debate that in his view the Human Rights Act is not affected. One of the rights in the Act is the right to education. How can children in poverty who are hungry and cold maximise the potential made available to them through education if they are hungry? More and more children are facing that.

More and more people from across all parts of this House are calling for the freeze to be ended, as are charities. My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) has written to the Chancellor and the Secretary of State calling for the freeze to be lifted. I hope that the Minister can give us some good news at the end of the debate.

We had the DWP estimates debate last week, as I know you are aware, Madam Deputy Speaker; you were in the Chair at the time. We debated how in some respects the DWP budget has increased to cover the additional pensioners we now face and the fact that tax credits in terms of universal credit have transferred from HMRC to DWP. But, as has been mentioned, the generosity of other social securements has actually decreased. The freeze and other social security changes have meant there have been £30 billion of savings to the Exchequer. By 2021, that will be £36 billion, rising to £38 billion by 2023. I understand that there has not been an assessment of the uprating order, so I would be very grateful if the Minister committed to undertaking an assessment of the impact on poverty levels of disabled people in the work-related activity groups. Will he also conduct an assessment of the impact of this social security uprating on overall poverty levels? Does he think it is acceptable to make these cuts and to cause these levels of poverty at the same time as cutting higher rate tax levels? Last week, the Office for National Statistics published data revealing the increase in income inequalities across the UK. What is the Minister’s assessment of how much further these inequalities will increase if the Government fail to change their regressive tax and social security policies?

In 2018, inflation stood at 2.48%, and although this has fallen since the beginning of the year, estimates for the rest of 2019 are not favourable, with Brexit-related uncertainty a key driver. Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation shows that the price of essentials has risen, with domestic fuel costs increasing by more than 40% over the past decade and the overall cost of food rising by a quarter in the same period. At the same time, the stagnation of wages and the rise in insecure work are putting immense strain on family budgets. Last year, working lone parents saw a decline in the adequacy of their income to meet minimum costs, whether they work full time or part time. Even those working full time on the national living wage typically fall £70 a week short of the minimum income standards budget advocated by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

In addition, what are the Minister’s estimates of the impact of a no-deal Brexit on these levels of poverty? What are his contingency plans for this? Will he be transparent and publish these reports? By continuing the freeze on the social security payments not included in this order, the Government are subjecting 10.4 million households to an average cut of £150 this year. I would be really grateful if the Minister would comment on the freeze, and on any opportunity there might be in the spring statement to bring it to an early end.

The dehumanising treatment of social security claimants is reflected not just in the poverty-level support they receive but in how they are treated. Many people have heard of claimants being sanctioned for months on end, but I have been contacted by some claimants who say that they were visited by DWP officials when they were ill in hospital. I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm whether this is Government policy or, as I hope, a mistake. Will he also tell us whether he intends it to be Government policy for the DWP to have unfettered access to claimants’ medical records, as was reported today in the GPs’ journal, Pulse?

I have already mentioned my concerns about the changes to pension credit and the lack of availability of this for a couple, when one of the couple is under retirement age. Age UK has described the change as a “substantial stealth cut” that could have a devastating effect on the health and wellbeing of some older people and increase the number of pensioners in poverty. Again, I would be grateful for the Minister’s assessment of the increase in pensioner poverty as a result of this measure.

We have to welcome any small changes in the uprating order, and of course we do, but we cannot get over the fact that 10.4 million people will still be worse off. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) has mentioned, those people are in absolutely dire need, so I hope that the Minister will be able to respond positively to this.

At 9.38 pm

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Ind): Setting aside my concerns about the direction of the Conservative party, one of the motivations behind those of us determined to build a new centre ground party is the opportunity to develop policy based on evidence and to reflect on and amend our policy when that evidence changes. The motion in front of us today is one that this House debates annually. Its purpose is to increase welfare benefits in line with the economy—in other words, the consumer prices index. Those benefits include the state pension, disability living allowance, the personal independence payment, widows’ and bereavement benefits, the employment and support allowance, support premium, and the maternity allowance. However, as we have heard across the Chamber tonight, there is one glaring omission. The order excludes working-age benefits. Within this exclusion also sit standard allowances in ESA and income support, child tax credit and the child element of universal credit—in other words, benefits paid to those struggling to make ends meet but who are doing the right thing and working, as well as those too ill to work and those families with children who are also struggling to make ends meet. Our fair-minded constituents would be right to think that there must be some mistake here, but there is not. Individuals are being subjected to the final year of the four-year benefit freeze.

In the 2016 Budget, the Treasury announced the four-year year freeze with the aspiration of saving £3.5 billion by 2019-20. Everyone understood the need to reduce spending right across Government, but policy cannot be static and must be regularly reviewed, particularly when the policy so directly affects the most vulnerable people in society. Estimates recently published by the
Resolution Foundation, which excels at statistical analysis in this space, indicate that the Government will have already exceeded their target by £900 million by the end of year three. Owing to inflation, the Resolution Foundation further estimates that while wages, the cost of living and pensioner incomes have risen over the period—everything has risen—these in-work benefits have seen a 6% real-terms decrease. The policy can no longer be right. The context within which the four-year benefit freeze policy was developed has changed. What kind of Government can think that it is morally acceptable to maintain this policy?

My recent visits with the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) to the parts of the UK struggling most with poverty have provided me with clear quantitative evidence, too. Society is responding with compassion and the strength of human kindness. Beneath the Government’s welfare safety net, society is providing three further layers: the established and now almost “normalised” food bank network; third sector charities and faith groups who open their doors when food banks are closed; and, most movingly, individual families helping those around them. The motion before us today therefore brings into sharp focus the damaging impact of the benefit freeze on the most vulnerable in society. With the recent news that tax income in January outstripped public spending by £14.9 billion—the biggest January surplus since records began in 1993—there is simply no reason to persist with the final year of the benefit freeze. We can afford it.

Working-age benefits must be uprated in line with all benefits from April 2019. As we have heard, ending the freeze would lift 200,000 people out of poverty. It is now almost universally understood that working-age benefits are insufficient for claimants to even maintain subsistence living. Claimants at the lowest point in their lives cannot afford to live on the current welfare safety net. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions herself has spoken out about the need for the freeze to end, and I can see the discomfit among those on the Front Bench, because I know that it is not within their gift to change things, but it is not too late for the Treasury to change course and end the four-year freeze. I have also been disappointed not to hear any suggestion from Ministers that the matter will be dealt with at the spring statement on 13 March. This Government must look again at the evidence: their benefit freeze is no longer morally nor economically viable and must end in April this year.

9.42 pm  
Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): The benefits freeze affects 10.7 million of the lowest-paid and most vulnerable people in our society. It comes on top of not just two years of a benefit cap, but a three-year freeze on tax credits from 2011 that saw them lose over £1,000 in value for ordinary, low-paid families. That came on top of VAT rising to 20%, the end of the education maintenance allowance and health in pregnancy grants, changes to the statutory maternity allowance and the £500 grant, and the bedroom tax. Families have lost a further £900 a year under the benefit freeze since 2016. It is therefore unsurprising that child poverty has risen since 2011-12, as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation set out. We have seen the number of children living in poverty increase by half a million, almost all of them in working families supported by working-age benefits. Nearly half of children in lone parent families are in poverty. That number will sharply rise when maintenance is included in universal credit, and the up-front costs of childcare mean that lone parents struggle to escape poverty.

Work is no longer a route out of poverty. Four million working people, a record number, are still living in poverty—half a million higher than five years ago. This benefits freeze will cost families another £210 a year. When this Prime Minister took office, she promised to support people who are just about managing. What are these 10.7 million people on working-age benefits if not just about managing?

Instead, we see that six in 10—over half—of the poorest fifth of the population are now in problem debt, which is contributing to the huge rise in mental health difficulties and emotional anxiety. The biggest problem, as I said earlier, is housing costs. Since 2010, housing costs have fallen for the richest three fifths of the country, but they have risen for the poorest two fifths. Of those on full housing benefit, 43% of single parents and 37% of couples still have to top up their rent from already inadequate other benefits. It is no wonder that people are having to make a choice between heating and eating.

We are seeing the number of pensioners in poverty rising: 330,000 more pensioners are now in poverty than five years ago, and most of them are in rented property, according to the annual poverty report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which is not disputed by any other organisation.

The costs for people on the lowest incomes rise even more than CPI inflation: food, heating, energy, public transport, council tax rises of 5% this year—4% in my area of Derbyshire—and rising care costs. Yes, charities can step in, and we are seeing some fantastic work by communities across the country, but this Government must not go back to a Victorian age in which struggling people are forced to rely on charity. With the best will in the world, charities cannot be expected to cover the whole country, especially in sparse rural areas like mine.

We also see people who are too proud to want to approach charities—people like Chris, whom I met on Saturday. Chris is living on the streets of my hometown of Buxton and unable to access support, and not wanting to because of the conditions placed upon it. It is not right that we have people living on our streets in this day and age, in the fifth richest country in the world.

This is a political choice that this Government have made at a time when corporation tax is due to fall again, the highest rate of income tax is also falling and the main rate of corporation tax for companies with profits of more than £1.5 million a year has almost halved, and will have halved over the next 10 years. That is where this Government’s choices are being made: not for the people who are visiting food banks, not for the people who are living on our streets but for the people who have the most.

9.48 pm  
Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): If it is true that, as we heard from the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen), tax income outstripped public spending by £14.9 billion this January—giving the Government their biggest surplus since records
began—we have to ask ourselves why on earth we are doing this. There can be no persuasive economic case to support it. Why is there a need to persist with another year of benefits freeze? Why are we holding most working benefits and tax credits to their 2015-16 value?

Pensioners, as we have heard, can expect a 2.6% increase, which I welcome, but the Minister’s persuasive argument for the triple lock to maintain income security for vulnerable pensioners could just as easily be made for all the other people who are about to lose out. Benefits aimed specifically at disabled people and carers are also set to rise, and I welcome that too, but how are those people fundamentally different from young children in their needs?

I will not go over all of this, but we have heard about the range of frozen benefits— in particular, child and working tax credits and child benefit. The attack on those benefits is about the meanest of all. If they were not frozen, those benefits would be rising by about 2.4% in today’s announcement. That might make the difference in whether someone can buy their kid a pair of shoes or guarantee that they have their breakfast before they go to school in the morning. Over the past four years, the most exposed, the most vulnerable and those at the poorest end of our society have suffered the loss of about 6.1% of the value of their benefits. It looks as though this is a deliberate strategy to punish people for being poor and vulnerable. It is hard to square that with the idea that austerity is over.

As we have heard, the ending of this benefits freeze would lift 200,000 people out of poverty, but as things stand this Government are on course to plunge a record number of children into poverty, and it sends the signal that they do not care. They could do something about it—there is no economic case here—but they do not care. If the Prime Minister had been sincere when she said that they do not care, they could do something about it. It is hard to square that with the idea that austerity is over.

I wish to pick up on a few points raised in this debate. A number of speakers said that we were not supporting those too sick to work. Let me be absolutely clear that the employment and support allowance support group rate will be increased from £37.65 to £38.55, and the severe disability premium will increase from £77.65 to £79.50. The hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) was spot on when she talked about the huge cuts in mainstream corporation tax, which I analysed at the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers when working on some of the major supermarkets. They actually took their corporation tax reduction and refused to even put that amount into wage growth, let alone into jobs. This is not a job creation scheme; it has made profits for shareholders, not for workers.

Justin Tomlinson: I thank all those from across the House who have taken the time to speak in this debate. As in last week’s estimates day debate, there was a lot of passion about very important issues. Although we do not agree on everything, this is a helpful debate in focusing our minds as we share the proceeds of growth in the coming years to make sure that we are targeting support at those who most need it.

I wish to pick up on a few points raised in this debate. Many speakers talked about poverty. Income inequality has fallen—it increased under the previous Labour Government. Rates of low income and material deprivation for children and pensioners have never been lower. There are 300,000 fewer children in absolute poverty and 200,000 fewer pensioners in absolute poverty. In the past five years food affordability has almost halved and is well below the EU average.

Debbie Abrahams: According to the Child Poverty Action Group, 100,000 children are in severe poverty as a result of the benefits freeze. Would the Minister like to accept that fact?

Justin Tomlinson: The stats are very clear: there are now 300,000 fewer children in absolute poverty. Where we are in agreement in this debate is that all speakers rightly welcomed the additional £1.7 billion for the universal credit work allowances. We continue to support those who are seeking to enter work, increase their hours or increase their pay.

Overall, this order is about striking the balance between targeting support to those who most need it and what is fair for the taxpayer. Under the previous Labour Government, who increased welfare spending by £84 billion—the equivalent of £3,000 per working household—that was not a fair balance.
Jim McMahon: Can we just take away this artificial divide between taxpayers over here and claimants over there? People who claim benefits also pay tax. They contribute and work hard, and they deserve a better deal than this.

Justin Tomlinson: That is why we are delivering record employment and increasing support for those who most need it, and why we are today announcing the latest sharing of growth with those who most need it, with a £3.7 billion increase. We are maintaining the Government’s commitment to the triple lock for both the basic and full rates of the new state pension; increasing the pension credit standard minimum guarantee by earnings to support the poorest pensioners; increasing the universal credit work allowances so that claimants can earn more before their payments are reduced; and increasing benefits to meet additional disability needs, and carer benefits, in line with prices. I commend this order to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

That the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 30 January, be approved.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I notice that we now move on to some 18 different remaining orders, some of which are very important and will affect the outcome of Brexit for this country on a whole range of issues, from road traffic to animals, gas, energy and arms and ammunition—all kinds of things. If each of these remaining orders were subject to an individual Division, by my calculations it would take up around four and a half hours of the House’s time, which is quite incredible. I believe, though, that if we get past 10 o’clock, we can have the much more sensible opportunity of voting on these issues using the deferred Division procedure. Can you advise us on what steps we can take to make sure that Members are not unnecessarily detained this evening by multiple complex Divisions, until such a time as this House introduces a more sensible, modern electronic voting system?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I can give him no advice further than that of which he is already well aware as an experienced and erudite parliamentarian. The fact is that I am about to proceed to the motions, as on the Order Paper.

Jim McMahon: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Earlier, there were exchanges relating to the Seaborne ferry contract, and I was staggered to see that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care was at the Dispatch Box responding to questions. I would welcome your advice about whether that was standard practice or unusual. Was there a point in our recent past when that was the case? Apparently, the issue was—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I can answer the hon. Gentleman’s point of order. The reason why the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care was at the Dispatch Box is that the contract in question was made by the Department for Health and Social Care. It was therefore the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Health. Such matters are not for the Chair or the Chamber, but for the Government.

Steve McCabe: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I know that this Government are tempted to play with rules as if they did not really exist, but is there any precedent for a set of orders of such importance to be placed on the Order Paper in the fashion that the Government have done this evening? I cannot recollect that ever happening in the 21 years that I have been in this place.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Again, I am happy to answer the hon. Gentleman’s point. It is quite normal for there to be several such orders on the Order Paper, to come up after the end of the business. I agree with him in saying that it is unusual to have such a large number, but he will not need me to tell him that this Parliament is currently dealing with a great many matters of secondary legislation in pursuance of the leaving of the European Union. If he notices that there is something unusual, then my guess is as good as his that that is what is unusual—we have not dealt with something of that kind before, and it does require a lot of legislation. As we have now passed the point of interruption at 10 o’clock, the matters before us will not be put for immediate Divisions—I think hon. Members had worked that out.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 3 to 8 together.

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ROAD TRAFFIC)
That the draft Road Vehicle Emission Performance Standards (Cars and Vans) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 18 December 2018, be approved.

That the draft Road Vehicles and Non-Road Mobile Machinery (Type-Approval) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 21 January, be approved.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION
That the draft Air Quality (Taxis and Private Hire Vehicles Database) (England and Wales) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ARMS AND AMMUNITION)
That the draft Law Enforcement and Security (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ANIMALS)
That the draft Aquatic Animal Health and Plant Heath (Legislative Functions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 17 January, be approved.

That the draft Animals (Legislative Functions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 18 December 2018, be approved.

Amanda Milling: Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),
EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS)

That the draft Transparency of Securities Financing Transactions and of Reuse (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 28 January, be approved. — (Amanda Milling.)

The Deputy Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 6 March (Standing Order No. 41A).

Madam Deputy Speaker: With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 10 to 12 together.

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES)

That the draft Securitisation (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 30 January, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ENERGY)

That the draft Electricity and Gas etc. (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 30 January, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ELECTRICITY)

That the draft Electricity Network Codes and Guidelines (System Operation and Connection) (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations, which were laid before this House on 30 January, be approved.— (Amanda Milling.)

Question agreed to.

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ELECTRICITY)

That the draft Electricity and Gas (Market Integrity and Transparency) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 30 January, be approved.— (Amanda Milling.)

The Deputy Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 6 March (Standing Order No. 41A).

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (GAS)

That the draft Gas (Security of Supply and Network Codes) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 30 January, be approved.— (Amanda Milling.)

The Deputy Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 6 March (Standing Order No. 41A).

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ELECTRICITY)

That the draft Electricity Network Codes and Guidelines (Markets and Trading) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 30 January, be approved.— (Amanda Milling.)

Question agreed to.

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FOOD)

That the draft Nutrition (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 30 January, be approved.— (Amanda Milling.)

The Deputy Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 6 March (Standing Order No. 41A).

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS)

That the draft Mobile Roaming (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 4 February, be approved.— (Amanda Milling.)

The Deputy Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 6 March (Standing Order No. 41A).

Madam Deputy Speaker: With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 18 to 20 together.

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (CIVIL AVIATION)

That the draft Aviation Security (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION)

That the draft Ozone-depleting Substances and Fluorinated Greenhouse Gases (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 6 February, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (CUSTOMS)

That the draft International Waste Shipments (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 11 February, be approved.— (Amanda Milling.)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Demanding faster treatment for pancreatic cancer

10.5 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I rise to present a petition on behalf of the people of the United Kingdom demanding faster treatment for pancreatic cancer. I pay tribute to all those who have signed the petition, and particularly those who presented it to Downing Street earlier today, including the family of Erika Vincent, who sadly passed away while building the petition to its current size.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland,

Declares that the Government’s 62-day target for cancer treatment is not suitable for pancreatic cancer, where 1 in 4 pancreatic cancer patients will have passed away within one month of diagnosis and 3 in 4 within one year of diagnosis, making it the deadliest common cancer; further notes the efforts of Erika Vincent who championed a campaign for faster pancreatic cancer treatment, and who sadly passed away last month shortly before
her petition reached a milestone 100,000 signatories and further that like Erika, we demand faster treatment and know that this is readily possible.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to set an ambition to treat people with pancreatic cancer within 20 days of diagnosis, by 2024.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Bus Services: Greater Manchester

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Amanda Milling.)

10.7 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I would first like to place on the record an interest, as a family member works for Transport for Greater Manchester, although not in the buses division. I bring to the House an important matter for debate and one that is as old as public transport itself: our bus services. I will speak about the impact of bus service reductions in Greater Manchester, the opportunities that arise through bus franchising and the need to bring about a new settlement for bus users in our city region.

For context, Greater Manchester’s bus services go back nearly 200 years to the original horse-drawn buses, but SELNEC—South East Lancashire North East Cheshire—brought together council transport departments from Manchester and its surrounding districts. In 1974, it became the Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Executive. In 1986, the bus operation was transferred to GM Buses, with its iconic orange and brown livery, which serviced communities across the city region and beyond until its employee buy-out in 1993, when it split services between the north and south of Greater Manchester. That was an important moment for the routes, services, pricing and quality of services we see today.

As a child growing up off Queens Road in Cheetham Hill, in the shadow of the imposing Queens Road bus depot, I would look at it as I walked to school each day, or to the Irish centre across the road, and the orange and brown livery was as powerful to me as the Coca-Cola or Heinz brands are to the whole population. It is a little-known fact—I am not sure that I should be saying this—that as a child playing on my pedal bike, I was so preoccupied with the plastic bottle that I had positioned against a rear wheel of the bike to try to make a motor engine noise that, as I went out on to Queens Road, I did not notice the passing vehicle and was struck by a bus driver. I am forever grateful that he was driving his car to work, and not his bus, at the time. I broke my collarbone and learned an important lesson about road safety. The local museum of transport housed in the depot would provide a staple visit. I made sure that each of my sons made their mandatory visit, whether they liked it or not, to take a photograph in the seat of a bus and a tram.

But it is not the past that occupies my time or my postbag today, but the state of public transport in Greater Manchester. By 1996, GM Buses South had been sold to Stagecoach and GM Buses North had been sold to First Bus, both of which are still operating from the depots that they inherited, basically splitting Greater Manchester in half. Rather than creating active competition, that created two, in my view, private sector monopolies with differential pricing and ticketing, and entirely different approaches to routes. Today, 82% of bus mileage in Greater Manchester is commercially operated and accounts for 90% of passenger journeys. Stagecoach operates the majority of routes in the south and First Bus operates the vast majority in the north, with very little mutual competition.
This was explored by the Competition Commission in a two-year investigation that found that nationally there were high levels of market concentration and a number of barriers to entry for new competitors—not least, the cost of establishing a depot, buying buses and creating routes. Its report found that head-to-head competition was uncommon and that the costs to passengers through the lack of competition was between £115 million and £305 million a year nationally.

The experience of many bus users is that bus services are being run for the benefit of the operators rather than bus users. Let us remember that when we say bus users, we are talking about those who need accessible, affordable and reliable transport to get to work, school or college within a system that, at the moment, complex, expensive and too often not fit for purpose.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. In my constituency, we are extremely reliant on the bus services. We have only two railway stations that serve only a part of the constituency. Complaints about bus services are a constant in my constituency emails. I am very grateful to him for raising these really important issues, which mean a lot to my constituents.

Jim McMahon: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I congratulate her on the work that she does in supporting constituents for whom this is a real issue. Middleton and Heywood have First Bus as the main operator as we do in Oldham, with the main depot being based in Oldham for north-east Manchester. It runs the lion’s share of the routes, so there is no competition that would mean that the standard was raised. I appreciate that point being made.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend and neighbour concerned, as I am, about the reliability of bus services? That is a constant cause of concern not just in casework but among my staff, one of whom had to wait over an hour for a bus tonight and was yet again late. Is my hon. Friend also concerned about the decrease in the use of bus services? There has been a decrease of 25 million journeys in the space of five years in Greater Manchester.

Jim McMahon: Over the past decade, we have seen 32 million fewer bus journeys a year as a result of poor services. I congratulate my hon. Friend and neighbour on the work that she does in fighting for access to rural services, where many people feel isolated. When the bus does not turn up on time when it is needed, particularly in the winter when it is dark, as at the moment, it can be very difficult for local people. She campaigns on that with real effect, and I congratulate her.

Liz McInnes: It is really important that we remember the role of bus services in addressing social isolation. A constituent came to see me about the cutting of a bus service, which meant she was unable to go out in the afternoons to shop and visit friends and family. She was an elderly lady. I wrote to the Minister for loneliness about it, who wrote back to me and said, “This is a matter for the Department for Transport.” Does my hon. Friend agree that there needs to be more joined-up working between Departments?

Jim McMahon: That is a really important point. By and large, someone living within 5 miles of Manchester city centre on a main road will probably get a reasonable bus service, and there will be quite a lot of competition for it. But for someone who lives off a main road, on an estate, the chances are that their route has been cut or cancelled completely. For many people—particularly those who live on estates on steep gradients—that can mean that they are completely cut off from access to good bus services and do not leave the house. People have experienced that in Royton and parts of Chadderton where bus services have been taken away. I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention.

The current system unfortunately sees Greater Manchester in a clean air crisis, with pollution causing around 1,200 premature deaths a year. That is across all transport, not just buses, but it is important that we try to get people on to sustainable, environmentally-friendly transport, not just to get to work and college but to save lives.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. As I said to him before the debate, Translink has spent a substantial amount of money on new buses in my constituency. Those buses are environmentally friendly, but they are also disabled-friendly. It is so important that we give the opportunity of rural and urban bus travel to people who are not able to access normal buses. Does he see that as one of the things that the Government should pursue in his constituency?

Jim McMahon: Madam Deputy Speaker, I cannot tell you how reassuring it is in these crazy parliamentary times to have an intervention from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon); it gives a lot comfort. That is a really important point. Disabled people find it difficult to leave the house, and they have to contend with not only buses but, when they get off the bus, the shops, department stores and supermarkets that are not accessible. What we can do as a public service is ensure that public transport is accessible, to connect them as much as possible with our towns, city centres and villages. I appreciate that intervention.

As I have said before, we cannot address the clean air crisis if we do not address the bus crisis. Over the past 10 years, we have lost 32 million bus journeys every year in Greater Manchester. That is a staggering number of journeys being diverted. I should say, out of balance, that that is partly because there has been significant investment in our tram system, so some people will choose to use the tram rather than the bus network, but that still does not account for the 32 million. We have seen a significant shift, and too many people rely on their private cars to get to work because bus services just are not good enough.

As a result of commercial decisions or because bus subsidies have been cut due to local councils having their budgets cut—of course, subsidised routes are funded by council tax through the transport levy, so if the council budget is cut, transport naturally gets cut, too—many communities have seen routes reduced or cancelled completely, cutting off entire communities. Many older and vulnerable people are now isolated. At the same time, we have seen the cost of travel increase. Ticket fares have increased by over 55% above the rate of inflation in the same period. How can it be right that we
are losing 32 million bus journeys a year, but the cost has increased by 55% over the rate of inflation? People are paying from both sides—through increased subsidies to operators and through poor services, and they are then charged on top of that. I pay credit to the Better Buses for Greater Manchester campaign, which provided that data.

Given the north-south divide in Greater Manchester, it is more expensive generally to travel across the city. If someone needs to make a bus journey that requires more than one operator, they have to use what is called a system one ticket, which is a multi-operator bus ticket. That costs £5.80 a day or £19 for a weekly ticket, often for people who are on the minimum wage and struggling to get by. We should compare that to what we pay for bus travel in London. Someone who needs to use multi-modal transport—say, the bus and the tram—will pay £9 a day or £38 a week. If we compare that with the same ticket in London, where someone wants to use a bus and the tube, they will pay £21.20. It is £38 in Greater Manchester, but £21.20 in London, so weekly tickets are more expensive—179% more expensive—in Greater Manchester than in London. Quite literally, passengers in Greater Manchester are being taken for a ride.

Liz McInnes: Oh dear.

Jim McMahon: Well, I had to say it. Give me some credit, please.

In 2014, the devolution agreement was reached with Greater Manchester leaders. At the time, I was the leader of Oldham Council, and we agreed to bring forward plans to franchise bus services in Greater Manchester. This would allow greater power over routes, frequency, operating hours, fares and standards. There has been a great deal of concern that the big operators, such as Stagecoach and First Bus, would seek any legal challenge to prevent bus franchising from happening, and there is little doubt that that has in part accounted for some of the delay we have seen.

Funding has already been spent by the Greater Manchester combined authority and the Mayor: £6 million to date, with a further £3.5 million to come and followed by another £2.25 million for bus reform towards 2020, totalling £11.25 million. Incidentally, that is dwarfed by the profit Stagecoach made last year alone, when it had a £17.7 million profit margin for the year. That may account for some of the nervousness we have seen: when making that much in profit, it provides a decent fighting fund if it has to take legal action to protect that profit. However, it is a bad deal for taxpayers and bus users.

Greater Manchester must now recognise that with every week, month and year that passes, it is the millions of people in our city region who will be paying the price of delay. That brings me to explore the willingness to do it Greater Manchester’s way. There is a reason why Greater Manchester secured the largest devolution settlement outside London and why Greater Manchester has attracted attention. It took things seriously; it made the evidence-based case; and it built partnerships and long-standing relationships to get things done. It is just not good enough that passengers and decision makers in Greater Manchester seem to be held to ransom by bus operators, which have taken hundreds of millions of pounds from routes, while routes have been lost and, year on year, the taxpayer subsidy is passed on. Unless a more balanced settlement is reached, that just is not a good deal, but it requires energy and determination to form a different vision.

While we wait for franchising to seek powers, we must use this time to secure any possible passenger advantage. It will come as no surprise that First Manchester was heading for difficulties because, after it secured an operating margin of 17.3% or £18 million in 2010, it lost ground with losses in 2016 and 2017 amounting to £11 million. When it became common knowledge that First Manchester was seeking buyers for its four depots in Greater Manchester, including in Oldham, together with its fleet of 500 buses and 2,000 employees, it was a once-in-a-generation opportunity to bring some order and sustainability to bus services covering some of the poorest communities in Greater Manchester. I took the opportunity to raise this in my letter to the Mayor of Greater Manchester on 6 February, and I still urge that action be taken.

A difference seems to arise from the Bus Services Act 2017 in relation to whether the restriction in the Act on setting up a new company means there is also a restriction on buying an existing operation. I am conscious of the time, so I will jump ahead in my speech. I sought the advice of the Library, and I was referred to a companies law specialist. They said that “it is clear that acquiring an existing company does not constitute the formation of a new company and so, as I would understand it, sits outside the restriction in the Bus Services Act”.

They also said: “It is my considered opinion that buying an existing company does not constitute forming a company.”

Even if conflicting legal advice was received focusing on the letter of the law as outlined in the Companies Act 2016, rather than the implied spirit of the Bus Services Act, there would be other options. We must make sure that we do not miss opportunities. For instance, there is the opportunity to have other municipal bus operators expand into Greater Manchester, such as those in Warrington, Reading, and Nottingham, which are performing well. If that is not considered to be an option, we could look at the formation of mutuals or co-operatives to make sure that passengers are part of the shareholding, or we could look at Manchester airport buying the service as a going concern and holding it ahead of bus franchising. There are plenty of options around. Fortune favours the brave, and it is important that we see determination.

Unfortunately, we have learned that the Queens Road depot, together with its 163 buses, has been sold to Go-Ahead for £11.2 million, separating it from the three remaining depots, including Oldham. While I accept that the new operator will work with other operators through the OneBus partnership it is my belief that carving up the north of Greater Manchester with a range of new operators buying the depots individually will make franchising harder, not easier. It is hugely disappointing, to put it mildly, that we have not capitalised on an opportunity that rarely presents itself.

Greater Manchester has done a great deal to ensure that there is investment in public transport. For instance, it has spent £90 million on bus priority measures and...
£130 million on bus stations, with an additional £29 million to support clean buses. It is important that operators play the game. I had an unfortunate exchange with Stagecoach Manchester on Twitter, as it was criticising the Mayor and the Greater Manchester combined authority for introducing new powers to reduce air pollution, as though that was not a reasonable thing to do, and it was not taking into account the £29 million clean bus fund invested by Greater Manchester. There was more than just a stick—there was also a significant carrot.

Public transport is key to giving people across Greater Manchester access to jobs, including constituents such as mine in Chadderton, Oldham and Royton who seek employment at key employment sites such as Trafford Park and Manchester airport, but who are denied that option because buses simply do not run to meet shift patterns, or are unaffordable and complicated, which disadvantages people trying to hold down more than one job, or who have with caring responsibilities and for whom time is precious.

This matters—all public transport users across Greater Manchester care about it. As 76% of all journeys using public transport are by bus, we must grasp this opportunity. Two and a half million people in Greater Manchester deserve better, but it requires courage. Remember, faint heart never won fair maiden, and it certainly does not get the buses to run on time either.

10.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I thank the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) for bringing this important issue to the House, and I welcome the opportunity to debate it and to collaborate on how we can continue to support and promote buses. I was particularly touched by the throwback images and his first impression of a bus. We all had those back in the day.

Buses play a hugely important role in our transport system. As we heard, they connect our communities to the workplace and to vital public services. They support our economy, they help to tackle congestion and they have an important contribution to make in reducing emissions—I hope to come on to that. I share the hon. Gentleman’s concerns about bus passenger numbers, which vary across the country, but we must not forget that there are over 4.4 billion bus journeys a year and buses remain the most popular form of public transport.

It is interesting to know—this is why we are all here and championing buses—that passenger satisfaction remains consistently high, with 88% of passengers satisfied overall with their bus journey. I cannot think of any other public service that rates so highly. We should take a moment to thank bus drivers, who are key to good journeys, and good bus companies that operate a good service. The benefits of a reliable and innovative bus service are clear: greater productivity and communities that are connected, rather than apart. That is why the Government remain committed to improving bus services and expenditure on buses.

Each year, my Department provides about £250 million in direct revenue support for bus services in England via the BSOG—the bus service operators grant—scheme. Of that, about £43 million is paid directly to councils outside London to support buses that are not commercially viable but considered socially necessary. The rest goes to commercial bus operators. Without that support, fares would increase and marginal services would disappear.

Government funding supports the additional £1 billion spent by local authorities on concessionary bus passes every year. The Government have committed to protecting the national bus travel concession, so that about 10 million people get the support that they need to travel off-peak anywhere in England.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of younger travellers. The Government recognise that young people’s travel and the level of fares is a complex area. There is no statutory obligation to provide a discounted travel price to young people, but many commercial and publicly funded reductions are available. I was particularly pleased to see Transport for Greater Manchester introduce its Opportunity Pass, giving all 16 to 18-year-olds free bus travel. Since 2010, the Government have invested over £450 million in bus-related local authority transport schemes, including £32.5 million in the Manchester Cross City bus scheme, to deliver a range of bus infrastructure and congestion management measures. That was no doubt welcome in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency.

To support buses today and to help them into the future, the Government delivered the Bus Services Act 2017, which contains a range of options for how to improve local bus services in England. In addition to franchising, there are new and improved options to allow local transport authorities to enter into partnership with their local bus operators to improve services for passengers. Partnership working between local authorities and their bus operators achieves the best results. It is not always about funding. Bus passenger numbers are up 50% in Bristol, 36% in South Gloucestershire and 31% in Reading. In York, the city council and operators launched a customer charter setting out the standard of service passengers can expect, and have committed to a range of measures to encourage bus use. Those are just a few examples of how effective partnerships can work.

Partnerships may not be the best solution in all areas. The 2017 Act also gives local authorities the potential to use new powers to franchise bus services in their areas. Like the system in London, franchising will enable authorities to specify the services that passengers want and deliver an integrated network of services. Mayoral combined authorities such as Greater Manchester are provided with automatic access to franchising powers, reflecting the clear, centralised decision-making responsibility for transport they hold. All the powers needed for Greater Manchester to franchise its bus network are already in place. However, the Greater Manchester Mayor felt he needed additional powers to fully consider bus franchising for Greater Manchester. Buses fall under many Departments, so the order that will be debated in the House tomorrow to give the Mayor the additional powers he has requested is being managed by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Jim McMahon: Just for the record, the additional powers the Mayor of Greater Manchester will receive through the statutory instrument tomorrow relate to accepting powers to pass the charges on. The Government have not provided the funding required to deliver bus franchising in Greater Manchester, so it now has to go on the council tax payers of Greater Manchester.
Ms Ghani: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point about the statutory instrument tomorrow, but funding for buses, especially for Manchester, is particularly high compared with other parts of the country. It does very well for buses through different types of funding across the Government. For example, I sign off on budgets for low-emission buses. Manchester is always very good at putting together fantastic bids and securing funding, including, I believe, a section of the £2.5 billion transforming cities fund, which will again provide an opportunity to support buses and tackle congestion, thus bringing communities together.

The hon. Gentleman talked a lot about how services can improve, especially when more information is available on routes and ticketing, and accuracy and transparency on fares. That is why the open data part of the Bus Services Act is absolutely key. We know that passengers want to have good information and clarity not only about when they can get their bus but on how much their ticket is going to be. The bus open data powers in the 2017 Act will go further than the partnership provisions requiring all bus operators of local services in England to open up route and timetable, fares and tickets and real time information for passengers from 2020. Those improvements aim to remove uncertainty in bus journeys, improve journey planning and help passengers to secure best value tickets.

The hon. Gentleman touched on accessibility. We recently launched the inclusive transport strategy, which looked at how we can further reinforce the accessibility that buses have and remind drivers in particular which parts of the bus are available for wheelchair users. That work will continue.

I will touch on air quality because the hon. Gentleman raised that valid point. The environment is absolutely key for our constituents and buses across the UK are cleaner than ever, with 15% of the fleet now operating using low-emission technology. The ultra-low-emission bus scheme was announced in March 2018, making £48 million available for local authorities and operators. He will be pleased to be reminded that bus operators operating in Manchester and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority received £14.76 million, which will fund 70 electric buses and support infrastructure.

Debbie Abrahams: The Minister said that 15% of buses are low-emission buses. What timescale are we looking for to get to 100% of buses being low emission?

Ms Ghani: The Department is doing what it can through the money that it is making available—for example, the £48 million that I mentioned—and the assumption is that that will help not only to retrofit buses but to encourage bus operating companies to invest in their infrastructure. We know that one reason why people will jump on a bus is that they realise that it is a cleaner way to manage the environment.

I fear that I may be running out of time. We have to accept that there is no single solution that will work everywhere. I am confident that our commitment to local transport and the powers in the Bus Services Act will help to drive up bus numbers, as we would like to see across the country, but we must remember that buses are managed by local politicians, local authorities and bus operators. Only they can deliver better services by working together. I look forward to working with the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton and anybody else who is passionate about buses to do what we can to improve bus numbers up and down the country.

Question put and agreed to.

10.36 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons
Tuesday 5 March 2019

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—
Infrastructure Funding: Devon and Cornwall

1. Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): What plans he has to allocate additional funding for infrastructure in Devon and Cornwall.

Robert Jenrick: The Government are increasing our national investment in infrastructure to the highest sustained level since the 1970s. In Devon, this will include £83 million towards the widening of part of the north Devon link road, and in Cornwall £78 million towards the St Austell link road.

Mr Speaker, may I wish Cornish Members gool Peran lowen—a very happy St Piran’s day?

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer, although my Cornish is not quite up to his level, given that I am a Devon Member.

The recent announcement of £80 million of funding for major resilience work at Dawlish was very welcome. Can my hon. Friend confirm that this is the first part of the investment plan and that the Government will provide additional investment as further aspects of the plan to secure our key rail infrastructure come forward?

Robert Jenrick: We are fully committed to rail resilience in the south-west, and the Chancellor restated this as a national priority in the Budget Red Book. As my hon. Friend has said, we are investing up to £80 million in the new seawall to provide greater protection to the railway at Dawlish. Network Rail is providing the further options he mentions to protect the line from extreme weather and improve the rail network for passengers in the south-west, and of course we will consider those proposals when we receive them.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Added rail resilience at Dawlish is really important for the far south-west to keep our train line open, but so is added road resilience. Can the Minister set out what additional funding he can put in place to make sure that the A38 is a safer road? At the moment, there are far too many delays and sadly far too many people die on it?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. By our decision to hypothecate vehicle excise duty, we have created the largest ever investment in our strategic road network, which could perhaps fund projects such as the one he raises. Additionally, our £2.7 billion transforming cities fund will support Plymouth and its surrounding areas in particular.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): Meur ras, Mr Speaker. Gool Peran lowen—happy St Piran’s day—and Kernow bys vyken!

The announcement yesterday on the stronger towns fund did not include any areas from Cornwall, yet Cornwall has always scored very highly on social deprivation and funding. I know that the coastal communities fund has been a help, but what assurance can I have from the Treasury that it will support towns in my area?

Robert Jenrick: The stronger towns fund announced this week will provide support for the south-west and all regions of the country, both in terms of direct funding to be paid to local enterprise partnerships and the competitive fund of £600 million that towns in the my hon. Friend’s constituency and those of other right hon. and hon. Members across the country should bid into.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Ind): The port of Brixham in my constituency lands the most valuable catch in England, but it has now reached capacity and needs urgent infrastructure investment to expand opportunities. Will the Minister assure me that our strategically important fishing industry and processing sectors will be fully considered in future infrastructure plans, and will he meet me to discuss Brixham port’s exciting plans for development, which need only modest investment to help them get rapidly off the ground?

Robert Jenrick: I would be happy to meet the hon. Lady. We are investing in port infrastructure, as indeed in other infrastructure projects across the south-west. I believe it was she who asked the Chancellor in the lead-up to the Budget to make that national commitment to Dawlish, for example. We are keen to listen to her opinions in this respect, and I would be very happy to meet her.

Money Laundering

2. Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): What recent steps he has taken to tackle money laundering.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The Government have made a very strong commitment to tackling money laundering. Recent initiatives include the creation of the economic crime strategic board and the National Economic Crime Centre. We have also strengthened anti-money laundering supervision through the creation of the Office for Professional Body Anti-Money Laundering Supervision, and we are reforming suspicious activity reports and tackling the abuse of Scottish limited partnerships.

Alison Thewliss: The Economic Secretary to the Treasury knows better than most of us about the nefarious impact of Russia, and I send my best wishes to his constituency, to the Skripals and, most of all, to the family and friends of Dawn Sturgess, one year after the Salisbury attack.
Yesterday, Prince Charles ended up being drawn into the troika laundromat scandal, with money linked via a maze of shell companies back to the Magnitsky case. Criminal and legitimate money is sloshing around together in our banking system. What are the Government doing to close the loopholes and stop legitimising the proceeds of kleptocracy?

John Glen: I thank the hon. Lady for her kind remarks about my constituency. I am familiar with the reports that appeared in The Guardian yesterday evening about the case to which she has referred. Following the response by the Financial Action Task Force to a two-year review of our standards in the United Kingdom, the Government recognise that we are world leaders in this regard, but there are some outstanding concerns about reports of suspicious activity in the banking sector. Work is ongoing, and I will take a close interest in it.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Can the Minister quantify the amount of extra tax that the Government have collected since 2010 that would otherwise have been unpaid, as a result of the measures they have taken to tackle money laundering?

John Glen: I cannot give my hon. Friend the exact figure, but we are anxious to crack down on suspicious activity when reports give us reason to believe that further measures are necessary. We have taken action in improving cross-governmental co-ordination, and we are working closely with the Home Office on the suspicious activity reports.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The Financial Secretary was unable to answer this question yesterday, so I shall ask it again. Can the Economic Secretary explain why, although the call for evidence on extending corporate liability for economic crime closed two years ago, we have yet to receive a response or see any action?

John Glen: The Ministry of Justice is looking at that, and will present its response to the call for evidence later this year.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): May I suggest that the answer to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) is £185 billion?

John Glen: I always take my right hon. Friend’s words very seriously, and I am sure that he must be right.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Britain is now a world leader in financial transparency and dealing with money laundering owing to the public register of beneficial ownership. What action do the Government propose to take to stop those standards being undermined by Crown dependencies, which rely on the British passport and British defence protection, but operate in a much more opaque manner?

John Glen: We are committed to introducing those registers by 2023. Since 2017, we have worked closely with law enforcement agencies through the mechanism of the exchange of notes with the overseas territories, and that has led us to unexplained wealth orders and the forfeiture of bank accounts.

New Technologies

3. Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to establish the UK as a world leader in new technologies.

12. Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to establish the UK as a world leader in new technologies.

15. Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to establish the UK as a world leader in new technologies.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): The Government are determined to ensure that the UK is at the forefront of the development of new technologies. Since 2016, I have committed £7 billion more—a 20% uplift—for research and development, thus demonstrating clear progress towards the Government’s ambition to raise investment in R&D to 2.4% of GDP by 2027. Among other things, those funds are supporting a £105 million national quantum technology programme and a £950 million artificial intelligence sector deal, and there is £250 million for connected and autonomous vehicles.

Trudy Harrison: Small modular reactors could bring a wealth of economic, environmental and social benefits. Will the Chancellor confirm that he supports their merits, and that there will be financial and policy support to ensure that they succeed?

Mr Hammond: The Government do indeed recognise the potential for the UK to become a leader in the development of the next generation of nuclear technologies, provided that there is demonstrable value for money for consumers and taxpayers. To that end, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is considering an industrial strategy challenge fund proposal for small modular reactors and whether it would provide value for money.

Eddie Hughes: I do not know whether you are aware, Mr Speaker, that up to 50 different metals may be used in a smartphone. What fiscal support could be given to the excellent work done by Birmingham University in addressing the rareness of those materials, as well as the recycling and reuse of batteries?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is right. Rare earths and other critical elements are at the centre of the electronics industry, which now defines our modern life. Some of the materials are very scarce, and recycling the large amounts that are already in use in batteries is crucial. In the 2017 spring Budget I announced the £246 million Faraday battery challenge, to be funded from the national productivity investment fund. Supported by the fund, the University of Birmingham, together with industry partners, is leading the way in developing new methods of recycling lithium batteries, which power so many of the objects that we use in our everyday lives.

Vicky Ford: Quantum technology is one of the most mission-critical technologies being developed today, and so far much of the work has been done at research level. How do the Government intend to help leading British
companies such as Teledyne e2v in Chelmsford to commercialise this activity, to ensure that quantum technology remains based in the UK?

Mr Hammond: I knew Chelmsford was going to get in there somewhere.

The additional £7 billion I mentioned earlier is focused on applied research and industry innovation and the commercialisation of the UK’s world-leading science base. Quantum technologies have the potential to be transformative, and the UK is a global leader, so last autumn I committed £315 million for a second phase of the UK’s landmark national quantum technology programme. This investment includes a £70 million industrial strategy challenge fund, which will help leading UK firms such as Teledyne accelerate getting their products to the market.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Chancellor knows very well that Huddersfield in the Leeds city region is a hotspot for new technology and innovation and a tech centre, but many people in Huddersfield and Leeds are demoralised by the future and leaving the European Union. What can the Chancellor do to give them some hope that there is a future for their businesses and universities?

Mr Hammond: I am well aware that Huddersfield, like Chelmsford, is a leading centre of industry and technology development. Many of our towns and cities that have traditionally been centres of manufacturing are changing very fast in response to the changing nature of manufacturing industry. What I can say to the hon. Gentleman is that I will be making a spring statement to the House next week in the context of some very important decisions that the House will be making about our exit from the EU, and I will be setting out my vision for Britain’s future.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Renewables is a key future technology sector. Can the Chancellor assure the House that the growth of the offshore sector will not be limited by Government airspace protection rules, or, if it will, will the Government look to invest instead in onshore wind?

Mr Hammond: I think the hon. Lady is talking about radar interference problems with wind turbines, something I remember from my Ministry of Defence days. The Treasury and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will always argue robustly for protecting the economic potential of these technologies, but of course we have to look at our national security interests as well and get the balance right.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Ind): How on earth do people think that we are going to be improving the UK’s new technology position when we are on the brink in this House of committing to a disastrous Brexit that will undermine our research funding, stifle our skilled migration, hobble in some ways some of the developments in our pharmaceuticals and biotech sector, and wave goodbye to the European Medicines Agency? Is not the truth that actually our task is going to be to prevent a deterioration in our prospects as a country if we go down that route?

Mr Hammond: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s point and I know he speaks sincerely and from the heart on these matters, but my view is that we have a huge amount of pent-up investment that has not gone ahead over the last two and a half years because of uncertainty. Once we can provide clarity to British business about our future, which we do by supporting the deal that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will be bringing forward next week, we will unleash that investment, allowing Britain to achieve its rightful potential as one of the world’s leading technology powers.

18. [909589] Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): New technologies enabling us to work from anywhere and at any time are bringing an end to the traditional, rapidly declining nine-to-five. To make the most of this, we need to harness such advantages to work smarter rather than just harder. How is the Treasury investing in enabling people to become more productive and to work more flexibly?

Mr Hammond: I started work in 1977 and I am not sure I ever remember that traditional nine-to-five, but the Government are helping people to become more productive and work flexibly by committing over £1 billion of public money to next-generation digital infrastructure, including full fibre broadband and 5G. Obviously, the primary investment will come from the private sector, but the public investment ensures that those parts of the country that would not otherwise be served because they are not commercial can share in this important technology. We are also supporting workplace productivity in other ways, including by investing £56 million to help small businesses to develop leadership and management skills in partnership with “be the business” programme.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I am sorry, but when it comes to funding the new technologies that really matter, this Government, and especially the Treasury, have been abysmal. The climate crisis is upon us now, but this Government’s reaction has been to axe carbon capture and storage funding; to cancel the Swansea lagoon, despite the fact that we were poised to be a world leader in tidal technology; and to slap innovative emerging storage technologies with business rates. At the same time, they are throwing billions into new tax breaks for oil and gas. Does the Chancellor agree that this Government are not facing the climate emergency but creating it?

Mr Hammond: No, we are committing additional funding to innovation and to research and development—the Faraday battery challenge is a good example—and lots of that money is going into the technologies that will underpin the decarbonisation of our economy. However, we have to get the balance right. Consumers of energy in this country do not want to see their bills rising because we have made imprudent decisions. We have to do this in a way that takes public opinion with us as we decarbonise our energy sector, our homes and our industry in a sustainable way.

20. [909591] Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): What is my right hon. Friend doing to ensure that small and medium-sized businesses in the north-west of England are at the forefront of our ongoing technological revolution?
Mr Hammond: I recently visited the north-west of England and saw at first hand the enterprising and enthusiastic spirit of SMEs in the region. I am happy to confirm that, in the 2018 Budget, I backed locally led innovation by doubling the strength in places fund to £235 million. I also committed an additional £5 million to encourage proposals for new university enterprise zones, following a successful pilot scheme that invested £15 million in Liverpool. The made smarter pilot in the north-west is helping manufacturers to adopt digital technologies, and together these measures will ensure that businesses in the north-west can take the lead in the fourth industrial revolution.

National Living Wage: Under-25s

4. David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Whether his Department has undertaken an economic impact assessment of extending the national living wage to people under the age of 25. [909575]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): The Low Pay Commission recommends minimum wages for the under-25s, such that they are as high as possible while maintaining young people’s employment prospects. We have seen a 45% reduction in youth unemployment since 2010 as a result.

David Linden: That is lovely, but it is not actually the answer to the question I asked, which was whether an economic impact assessment had been carried out. Clearly, the answer is no. The Government obviously have an ideological problem with a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work. Given that this is national apprenticeship week, does the right hon. Lady really think that it is acceptable to pay apprentices just £3.70 an hour in this country under UK law? Will she use the spring statement to take action to introduce a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work? If she will not, will she devolve this to Scotland so that we can do the job for her?

Elizabeth Truss: The reality is that we have been so successful in reducing youth unemployment—which in 2010 was almost double what it is now—because we have taken a reasonable strategy with minimum wages. We have also had a welfare to work programme and helped young people to get experience and skills. It would be completely wrong to raise wages to the extent that young people were unemployed and unable to get the experience and skills that they need to succeed in life.

No Deal EU Exit: Job Losses

5. Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on potential job losses as a result of the UK leaving the EU without a deal. [909576]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The Government’s analysis indicates that leaving the EU without a deal would not be good for the UK economy, which is why we are so determined as a Government to secure an appropriate deal with the European Union that can pass through this House.

Gerald Jones: There are 4,000 jobs in the manufacturing sector in Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney. This Government have had two years to negotiate a good deal for that sector, but they have so far failed to do so. Does the Minister share my concern that Nissan’s decision to build its X-Trail in Japan, and similar decisions by Honda, are a sign of things to come as a result of this Government’s chaotic negotiations?

Mel Stride: The chief executive of Honda has made it perfectly clear that the company’s recent decisions were not a consequence of Brexit. Other factors across the world are affecting car sales, including the switch away from diesel and, in the case of Honda, the agreement on tariffs that has been entered into between the European Union and Japan, which will mean that, after the move to Japan, exports into Japan will attract no tariffs.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Does not this underline the importance of fine-tuning the deal so that we can jettison the backstop and use existing technology and EU law to take forward the innovative Malthouse proposals, which will ensure that we can move forward and build the new Britain?

Mel Stride: The House has made clear the basis on which it would be prepared to accept the deal negotiated with the European Union, and that will necessitate some changes to the backstop arrangements. That is what is being negotiated at the moment and it will come back to the House in due course.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): This country’s public sector institutions spend £1 billion a year on food, and there have been many warnings that food price inflation in the event of a no-deal Brexit will make that unaffordable. What is the Minister doing to protect not just jobs in the food sector, but the people who depend on those meals?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady is right to raise an issue that relates to our tariff policy in the event of a no-deal Brexit. We have made it clear that we will carefully balance this, protecting consumers from unwanted price rises at the same time as using our tariff policy to provide appropriate protection to vital elements of the economy.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Cheshire-based company ABB has stated that investment in automation could result in radical improvements in cost efficiency, allowing work to move back to the UK. Will my right hon. Friend consider incentivising investment in automation through the tax system?

Mel Stride: We have already brought in some important measures to do just that, not least by increasing the annual investment allowance from £200,000 to £1 million, as announced at the previous Budget. We keep all taxes under review and I will certainly bear my hon. Friend’s important point in mind.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): In a recent survey by the Fraser of Allander Institute, 62% of Scottish businesses said that they did not feel ready for Brexit. Will the Chancellor bring forward an emergency
Budget to provide support for small and medium-sized enterprises so that they can cope with the Brexit that he proposes?

Mel Stride: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has made it clear that, in the event of a no-deal Brexit, we will take stock of the situation and take whatever measures are necessary to ensure that we protect and support businesses throughout the United Kingdom.

Kirsty Blackman: I was specifically talking about the Brexit that the Chancellor is proposing, which is presumably not a no-deal Brexit, although it looks like 100,000 jobs could be lost in Scotland as a direct result of no deal. However, in relation to the deal Brexit, the Bank of England has said that unemployment could be up to 4% higher by 2023 if the Prime Minister’s deal is approved. Does the Chancellor believe that keeping his job is worth costing thousands of others?

Mel Stride: I do not believe that the figure to which the hon. Lady refers is accurate. This Government have seen employment at a record high and unemployment at the lowest level since 1975, and youth employment is half what it was in 2010—unlike the Labour Government, who saw youth unemployment increase by almost 50%.

Road Infrastructure Funding

6. Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase the level of funding for road infrastructure.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): At the Budget, I announced an extra £420 million for road maintenance, including potholes, and £150 million to ease congestion on local roads. I also announced that, from 2020, all road tax will be invested back into our road network via a national roads fund, which will involve £28.8 billion between 2020 and 2025, including a record £25.3 billion for our strategic roads. That is part of our plan to upgrade our infrastructure so that it is fit for the future and another element of our overall public investment, which is set to reach the highest sustained level for 40 years.

Gordon Henderson: I am grateful for that answer and for the continued investment in our roads, but does my right hon. Friend understand the frustration felt by my constituents, who have seen their area transformed by massive housing developments, but have not seen improvements to the local road infrastructure, particularly the A249 and the M2, to serve the new homes?

Mr Hammond: We are making good progress on improving junction 5 of the M2 and the A249 Stockbury roundabout, reducing journey times, making journeys safer and supporting future housing and employment growth. All that is in addition to recent investments from the local growth fund in Sittingbourne and Sheppey, including the opening of a new roundabout on the A2500 in December 2018, following a £1.26 million investment, and £2.5 million for the regeneration of Sittingbourne town centre.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Funding for road infrastructure is very important, but I wonder whether the Chancellor thinks it should sit alongside investment in more active travel—walking and cycling.

Mr Hammond: Both. Of course we want to encourage active travel—cycling and walking—particularly in cities where that is the most appropriate response to dealing with the twin challenges of congestion and air quality. Sheffield has benefited from funding that will allow it to enhance the offer to walkers and cyclists.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): Over the last decade, we have seen a 25% increase in the number of enterprises in the fantastic county of Essex. That is despite our crumbling infrastructure and our roads. May I make an urgent plea to the Chancellor to support and invest in the two economic arteries that go through the heart of Essex and the Witham constituency—the A12 and the A120?

Mr Hammond: This is probably not the first time that my right hon. Friend has asked me about those two roads. She is a formidable champion of the transport infrastructure that runs through her constituency; I congratulate her on that. As I have just announced, we have made a commitment to hypothecate all road tax to the national roads fund. That will make a record amount of funding available for road projects in the next period.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Road traffic accidents are a major cause of acquired brain injury, so I urge the Chancellor of the Exchequer to consider setting up a special fund, in proportion to the amount that he is talking about for road infrastructure—and announce it next week, if he is still going to do his statement next Wednesday—to make sure that there is a fund available to people in the national health service who are developing very innovative ways of rehabilitating people who have had road traffic accidents. If he does not understand, he can ask his hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, who is very good on that.

Mr Hammond: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that I will be making a spring statement next week and remind him and the House that it is not a fiscal event under the new Budget architecture. We have put very significant additional funding into the national health service. I note the point he makes about acquired brain injury and the research that is happening on that. I will draw the Health Secretary’s attention to his comments.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The Chancellor has rightly made great play of the fact that we need to improve our productivity in this country. One of the biggest drags on productivity in my part of the world is clogged-up roads, and my part of West Yorkshire is one of the most congested parts of the UK. So will the Chancellor use money from either his productivity fund or his road-building fund to ensure that there is enough money in the kitty to progress the long-awaited, much-needed Shipley eastern bypass?

Mr Hammond: As my hon. Friend will know, we have funded a study into the Shipley bypass. It is absolutely right that, often, the highest-value road investments can be relatively modest local schemes that relieve pressure and allow town regeneration, the release of housing land and the more efficient operation of local industry. We will have a record-sized fund available through the hypothecation of vehicle excise duty.
Mr Speaker: The Member for Shipley will not stop going on about it until he gets it; I think of that we can be absolutely certain.

No Deal EU Exit: Manufacturing Sector

7. Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What steps his Department has taken to mitigate the potential effect on the economic sustainability of the manufacturing sector of the UK leaving the EU without a deal. [909578]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The steps we are taking to protect our manufacturing in the event of no deal include supporting the Prime Minister’s deal and the negotiations to make sure that we have a smooth exit from the European Union, and the Treasury itself has made available in excess of £4 billion by way of contingency funding for Departments right across Whitehall.

Mr Sharma: I thank the Minister for that response. Last month, I surveyed businesses in my constituency and they overwhelmingly said that they wanted Brexit cancelled. Will the Chancellor stand up for British businesses, end the uncertainty and use his immense personal prestige in the Cabinet and with the Prime Minister to stop Brexit once and for all?

Mr Speaker: I hope the Chancellor heard the bit about his prestige.

Mel Stride: It is just little old me, I am afraid, but I have to say that I believe we should respect the result of the June 2016 referendum, a democratic exercise that saw a higher turnout than for any other democratic event in the history of our country. The important thing now is that we get the right deal for us to leave, which we are working on. When it comes back to Parliament, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will support it.

21. [909592] Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The Chancellor has recently attended two events that I was also present at, which were organised by major aerospace companies, so he knows how they feel about the terrifying prospects of no deal. As these are the companies that pay this country’s bills, why is he ignoring them?

Mel Stride: We are most certainly not ignoring those businesses—or indeed businesses from a variety of different sectors up and down the economy. We have been deeply engaged with business, through the Treasury, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and other Departments. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that, for example, on the issue of just-in-time deliveries and the flow of trade across our borders, we have done an immense amount of work to prepare for the possibility of a no-deal exit to make sure that we protect the very companies to which he refers.

Single-use Plastic Waste

8. Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to help reduce the amount of single-use plastic waste in the environment. [909579]

Mr Hammond: The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): We are acting to tackle single-use plastic waste at source by introducing a world-leading tax on plastic packaging. The tax, which I announced at the Budget, will provide a clear economic incentive to business to use recycled plastic and, alongside the reform of the plastic producer responsibility system by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, it will transform the economics of sustainable packaging. The Government recently published consultations on the detail of both measures, alongside consultations on consistent waste collection and a potential deposit return scheme for beverage containers. We are determined to be the first Government who leave the environment in a better state than they found it in.

Mark Pawsey: I hear what the Chancellor is saying, but in setting policy will he recognise the positive role that plastic packaging plays in reducing cost to consumers by protecting goods in transit and in reducing the environmental burden of food waste by keeping food fresher for longer?

Mr Hammond: The points my hon. Friend makes are well made, and of course this is about getting the balance right. The Government recognise that plastic packaging can play an important role, but we want to reduce the environmental impact of single-use plastic waste and encourage more sustainable forms of plastic packaging that can be recycled. The packaging tax will encourage businesses to use more recycled plastic in the production of packaging and will therefore drive a more sustainable packaging industry.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): My 10-year-old constituent Emily Haines wrote to me about this issue, and she assured me she had not just copied and pasted. Indeed, when I wrote back to her by hand, her father emailed me to say that he had no idea that his daughter had written to me on this subject. So may I ask the Chancellor not to listen to those who say that he should in any way dilute what he is doing on single-use plastics? Indeed, he should do more and do as Emily says: introduce “tough new taxes” to make sure that we deal with this environmental scourge.

Mr Hammond: That is what we are doing. This will be the world’s first plastic tax and it is carefully designed to go with the grain of the market: to incentivise manufacturers to use more recycled plastic in their packaging. Because of that, it creates an effective market for packaging and, together with the producer responsibility note system, will transform the way in which plastic packaging enters the circular economy in this country.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I am pleased that the Chancellor is, apparently, taking the issue of plastic waste seriously. The Government have committed £61.4 million to global research to help to prevent plastic waste from entering the oceans. Given the challenge, is that sufficient?

Mr Hammond: It is a good start. The idea is to identify ways in which we can work with countries around the world, including many of our overseas territories, which are particularly vulnerable to this issue, to ensure that we develop effective methods of avoiding plastic waste entering the ocean. Of course the
The Government are committed to ensuring 30 important transport schemes in Kent and Medway.

Mr Hammond: I am not going to take any lectures about waste from anybody on the Opposition Front Bench. This lot are world-champion wasters of public money. They have done it before and given half a chance they will do it again.

**Infrastructure Funding: Medway and Kent**

**Robert Jenrick:** Talking of preventing waste, what with the millions wasted on the ferries fiasco, the drone debacle, the Northern rail mess, the Carillion collapse, the electronic tagging turmoil, the £2 billion East Coast chaos and, finally, £72,000 spent on defending an illegal prisoner book ban, is it not time for the Chancellor, as the custodian of the public finances, to impose a ban on the failing Secretary of State for Transport wasting any more public dosh?

Mr Hammond: I am not going to take any lectures about waste from anybody on the Opposition Front Bench. This lot are world-champion wasters of public money. They have done it before and given half a chance they will do it again.

**Infrastructure Funding: Medway and Kent**

**Elizabeth Truss:** As I pointed out, social care funding and access to it is increasing beyond inflation. In fact, we have seen improvements in many figures. For example, since March 2017, the number of patients who have been delayed leaving hospital due to social care has halved.

**Economic Growth and Employment**

**Chris Philp:** It is welcome that 75% of those new jobs are full-time and only 3% are zero-hours contracts. It is also welcome that the minimum wage has gone up by 38% since 2010, but what assurance can the Minister give that the policy of dramatically increasing the minimum wage to help the poorest in our society will continue?

**Gareth Thomas:** I am not going to take any lectures about waste from anybody on the Opposition Front Bench. This lot are world-champion wasters of public money. They have done it before and given half a chance they will do it again.

**Infrastructure Funding: Medway and Kent**

**Rehman Chishti:** Medway Council’s £170 million housing infrastructure bid will have a significant impact on the unlocking of regeneration in the Thames estuary, providing the extra much-needed homes, jobs and transport connectivity. Will the Minister clarify when such excellent bids will be considered and announced? By way of declaration, I am a member of Medway Council.

**Robert Jenrick:** My hon. Friend has been raising this matter assiduously. At the spring statement in 2018, the Government announced that Medway’s housing infrastructure fund bid was shortlisted for the next stage of assessment, and we look forward to receiving the final proposal later this month. It will be considered alongside other HIF bids.

**Social Care Funding**

**Mike Amesbury:** Eighty-seven people in this country die each day before receiving the care that they need. Does the Minister agree that that figure is shameful and that the Chancellor should use the spring statement to tackle the funding crisis in social care?

**Gareth Thomas:** I am not going to take any lectures about waste from anybody on the Opposition Front Bench. This lot are world-champion wasters of public money. They have done it before and given half a chance they will do it again.
have seen 18.3% growth since 2010, and a record 32.6 million people in work. We will continue to prioritise interventions around technical education, cuts in business taxes and support for new technologies to recognise the new jobs that need to be provided for.

Mr Speaker: Well done.

Benefits Freeze

13. Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of the freeze on benefits on the level of personal debt of benefit recipients.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):
The decision to freeze most working-age benefits for four years from 2016-17 was one of a number of difficult financial decisions that were taken, but to assist claimants who are affected by debt, the Government announced as part of the 2018 Budget package, a reduction from 40% to 30% in the maximum rate at which deductions can be made from universal credit awards. That change will help 290,000 claimants.

Neil Coyle: I thank the Minister for his reply. This morning, the Select Committee on Work and Pensions visited Charles Dickens Primary School in my constituency to talk to parents, children and teachers about the impact that the benefits freeze and other welfare cuts have had on local families, many of whom have been pushed into debt, poverty and destitution as a direct result of Government policy. Will the Government listen to the Select Committee and lift the benefits freeze one year early?

John Glen: The Government have been very responsive to representations over the last two Budgets. There are 637,000 fewer children in workless households than in 2010. We made a number of interventions in the last Budget to increase the availability of interest-free advance loans to those who need them. We are listening, and continue to listen, to the concerns of the sector.

Economic Productivity

14. Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to increase economic productivity.

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick):
The best way to sustainably drive economic growth is to raise productivity, and that is a priority for this Government. We are increasing public investment in economic infrastructure to its highest sustained level in my lifetime. In the autumn Budget, we set out further investments to support business, technical skills and new technologies.

Julian Sturdy: Last month, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury saw for herself the investment that York-based Pavers Shoes is making to change its productivity, yet local businesses are concerned about the effect of traffic congestion on local productivity. With that in mind, will my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary assure me that the Treasury is fully behind the Department for Transport’s proposals to fund the dualling of the York northern ring road?

Robert Jenrick: My right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary says that she saw some very good leopard-print shoes at Pavers Shoes—and she knows a potential customer for them. Pavers is a highly successful business; I have seen for myself in India the success that it is having in selling shoes. We are committed to increasing transport investment in the north of England; the Secretary of State for Transport recently announced the dualling of the A1237 York outer ring road as a scheme in development for the major road network funding.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that one of the ways to increase productivity is by maintaining grants at European levels of investment in research and development? We have a lot of good universities in this country.

Robert Jenrick: This Government are absolutely committed to maintaining research and development; that is why we will be investing in it at record levels. We are also supporting the private sector, for example by making research and development tax credits more generous so that businesses across the country can collaborate with universities to drive the economy forward.

Tax Avoidance Enablers: HMRC Resources

16. Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): What steps has he taken to ensure that HMRC has adequate (a) powers and (b) resources to investigate tax avoidance enablers.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride):
The Government take a very serious view of those who enable or promote tax avoidance. We have taken a number of measures to clamp down on them, including penalties of up to £1 million.

Alex Norris: In 2017, the Government introduced the Criminal Finances Act to great fanfare, claiming that they were clamping down on the facilitators of tax-dodging. Will the Minister please confirm how many prosecutions have been brought for the new offence of failing to prevent tax evasion?

Mel Stride: We have taken action against enablers and promoters, and the cumulative amount of time in prison that has resulted from those particular actions is in excess of 100 years.

Mr Speaker: Well done.
Stephen Kinnock: But may I blend it with topical question 1?

Mr Speaker: No, but you can blurt it out on the question with which we were dealing, if you want. Unburden yourself, man.

23. [909594] Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Thank you for setting the stage for me so well, Mr Speaker. I am proud to chair the all-party parliamentary group for post-Brexit funding for nations, regions and local areas. It is vital that we have a fair settlement for the regions that need it most as we transition from EU funding to post-Brexit funding. Will the Chancellor of the Exchequer or the Minister responsible meet the APPG to discuss this vital issue?

Elizabeth Truss: I would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman and colleagues to discuss this important issue.

Mr Speaker: Oh, I see what the hon. Gentleman was driving at in relation to topical questions. Jolly well done; what a prescient fellow. We now come to topical questions. I call Stephen Kinnock.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I cannot think of another question to ask, as my question has been responded to.

Mr Speaker: I know that the hon. Gentleman does not believe in the hereditary principle, but I do not think that those words would ever have come out of the mouth of his dad. I think he should have a go. Just say “Topical 1”, young man.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Topical 1.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): I have a sense that by the time I have responded, inspiration will have struck the hon. Gentleman.

My principal responsibility is to ensure economic stability and the continued prosperity of this country. At this juncture, the best way to achieve that objective is to support a negotiated Brexit ensuring a smooth and orderly departure from the EU through a transition period to a new relationship that allows our mutual trade to continue to flourish.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Since the introduction of the minimum wage, only 14 employers have been prosecuted by HMRC for failing to pay the minimum wage. Does the Chancellor agree that that is a completely unacceptable state of affairs? What action is he taking to boost the capacity of HMRC to go after those who are not paying the minimum wage?

Mr Hammond: HMRC does take action against errant employers. It is always pleased to receive information on suspected non-compliance and will investigate any such cases. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman had difficulty thinking of a question. Anticipating this situation,
I have at least four or five potential questions that he could have asked me, and I am happy to show them to him afterwards.

**Mr Speaker:** Colleagues, on a discretionary basis I am changing the order, but, believe me, I know why I am changing the order and there is a compelling reason in this instance for doing so.

T8. [909604] Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): In yesterday’s education debate in Westminster Hall, we heard about a national emergency in school funding based on the National Audit Office’s predictions of £3 billion of savings being required in the next year—and I have often gone on about the £2 billion shortfall in children’s social care. Will schools and children’s social care be at the top of the Chancellor’s priority list in the forthcoming comprehensive spending review?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): We were able to increase the education budget by £1.3 billion last year, which means there have been real-terms funding increases per pupil. We are already the top spenders in the G7 as a proportion of GDP, according to the OECD. But I do recognise that we need to make sure that, going into the future, our education system is properly supported. I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend and colleagues to discuss this further.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): When the Conservatives lost their majority at the last election, the Chancellor conjured up a £1 billion bung to the Democratic Unionist party to buy the Tories back into office. Yesterday, with the announcement of the towns fund, we reached a new low in politics in this country, with the attempt by the Government to purchase the votes of Labour MPs to vote for the Brexit deal. Pork barrel politics has become the new norm under this Government. Can I ask the Chancellor: if the price of a DUP vote has been £100 million each, how much has he calculated a Labour MP’s vote will cost?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): The Government have been investing in our cities across the country with interventions such as the transforming cities fund—a £2.5 billion investment. We believe it is important to mirror those investments to drive productivity and economic growth in our towns. This week, we have announced a £1.6 billion intervention to support those towns, building on other interventions that we have made throughout the course of the past 12 months, including the future high streets fund.

John McDonnell: I can understand why the Chancellor has broken convention today in not responding, because I think he would be ashamed to respond. Let me tell him what the answer is: if a DUP vote is worth £100 million each, what Labour MPs were offered yesterday was £6 million.

Let me ask the Chancellor to undertake another calculation. Seven days ago, he was forced to publish the Government’s assessment, again, of how much a no-deal Brexit would cost this country—in today’s prices, nearly £200 billion. How much of a threatened cost to this country will it take for this Chancellor to find a backbone to stand up to the Prime Minister and the European Research Group to prevent no deal or a bad deal? Or is the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions the only Cabinet Minister willing to put country before career?

Mr Philip Hammond: Oh dear, oh dear. As the right hon. Gentleman knows very well, I have been working tirelessly to ensure that we avoid a no-deal exit—that we leave the European Union in a smooth and orderly fashion to a new negotiated partnership that allows our complex and important trade relationships to continue to flourish in the future. That is what I spend every working day doing.

T2. [909598] Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): The Chancellor briefly mentioned the spring statement. Can he update the House on his plans for the spring statement on 13 March?

Mr Hammond: As my hon. Friend is aware, because I have said it already this afternoon, the spring statement is not a fiscal event, but I will update the House on the Office for Budget Responsibility’s forecasts for the UK economy and for the public finances. I will follow the approach that I took at spring statement 2018 and also provide the House with an update on progress since the 2018 Budget and set out our intended direction for announcements later in the year. Although it is not a fiscal event, I already anticipate my hon. Friend beating a path to my door before the Budget in the autumn.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Schools in my constituency face severe budget pressures running into millions. By 2021, some schools will not be able to afford any teaching assistants, learning support assistants, office staff or site staff. Does the Chancellor realise the perilous state of schools’ finances, and will he announce adequate funding for schools in his spring statement next week?

Elizabeth Truss: As the Chancellor said, the spring statement is not a fiscal event. We are increasing school funding in real terms per pupil, but of course we need to ensure that we are investing properly in our education system. We are looking at human capital and what will be the most important investments, and we will report on that at the spending review.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): Given the vital work done by East Coast College and Lowestoft Sixth Form College in promoting social mobility and improving the UK’s productivity, will my right hon. Friend take full account of the letter sent on behalf of 164 Members from across the House and increase further education funding, ideally at next week’s spring statement, but if not, at the forthcoming spending review?

Elizabeth Truss: FE spending is a priority, and we have protected the base rate of funding between 2015 and 2020. I was grateful to receive that letter from colleagues and have organised a meeting on 19 March. I am not sure whether we will be able to fit 164 people in a room, but I hope my hon. Friend will be able to attend.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the Chancellor agree that the £1.6 billion set aside for towns is a pale imitation of the regional
growth fund set up under the coalition? Will he look at establishing a Brexit redundancy fund of up to £7.5 billion, to help the 750,000 people who are estimated to lose their jobs in a no-deal scenario?

**Mr Philip Hammond:** As I have told the House many times—I will elaborate more at the spring statement next week—in what I now think is the unlikely event of a no-deal exit, the Government have both fiscal and monetary tools available to them to support the economy. Of course, the likely shock would be on the supply side of the economy, and we would have to be careful that fiscal interventions did not merely stimulate inflation. If we are to find ourselves in that situation, we have the firepower and the clear intent to intervene to support the economy.

**T6.  **[909602] Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I am sure that all those on the Treasury Bench agree that it is a really important responsibility of the Government to ensure that our children and young people can achieve their full potential. With that in mind, can my right hon. Friend assure me that skills and education funding will receive the priority attention it deserves in the upcoming spending round?

**Elizabeth Truss:** My hon. Friend is right. We also need to ensure that we are spending money on the right things. For example, the changes this Government have made to phonics have seen our children go from some of the poorest readers in Europe to some of the best. It is about money, but it is also about what we do with that money.

**T9.  **[909605] [R] Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Given the urgent need for clarity on post-Brexit regional funding, when do the Government intend to launch the consultation on the UK shared prosperity fund?

**Mr Philip Hammond:** We regard the UK shared prosperity fund as very important, and we will launch a consultation this year on plans for the fund.

**T7.  **[909603] Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Will the Chancellor tell the House how many people in my Dover and Deal constituency, since 2010, are either paying no income tax whatsoever, thanks to Government policies, or have seen an income tax cut? While he is about it, could he put that in a spreadsheet for every single constituency so that the whole House can see what has been done?

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride):** It is not possible to provide an estimate down at constituency level about the impacts of the changes in the personal allowance, but I can inform my hon. Friend that no fewer than 234,000 individuals have been taken out of income tax altogether who are living in the south-east, which obviously includes Dover.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): Does the Chancellor agree with his right hon. Friend the Environment Secretary, who has told me on a number of occasions that he believes other European countries are looking enviously at the United Kingdom’s withdrawal deal, especially in the context of all the economic analysis the Treasury has carried out on Brexit scenarios?

**Mr Philip Hammond:** I am not in a position to comment on private conversations that the hon. Gentleman may have had with my right hon. Friend the Environment Secretary, but I can tell him that I agree with everything my right hon. Friend has said at this Dispatch Box.

**T10.  **[909606] Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What assessment has the Treasury made of the impact of air passenger duty on regional and short-haul airlines?

**Robert Jenrick:** Air passenger duty is a per passenger levy paid by all airlines, so there is no reason to believe that it discriminates against smaller airlines. We have now chosen to freeze APD on short-haul flights for eight years and to take children out of it altogether. The Labour party of course want to hike it with its holiday tax.

**Laura Smith** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): What is the Chancellor doing to make sure local authorities have sufficient funding to allow care providers to pay sleep-in shifts at a national living wage rate?

**Elizabeth Truss:** We are currently working on this with the Department of Health and Social Care.

**Nicky Morgan** (Loughborough) (Con): The Treasury Committee will today publish the Economic Secretary’s letter to me of 30 January on the current solution to problems faced by mortgage prisoners. This solution requires the private sector to be receptive to providing new mortgages to mortgage prisoners currently trapped with inactive lenders. What update can Ministers provide on the promised Treasury officials’ work with those lenders?

**The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):** I can tell my right hon. Friend that I am in conversation with the Financial Conduct Authority about its move to a relative rather than an absolute test. I note that there are a range of views out there about how this problem can be dealt with. The FCA has said that it will come back later this spring with its response, and I am happy to meet my right hon. Friend to discuss her concerns further.

**Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): This morning, the Financial Times entitled its editorial, “UK territories need to embrace transparency”, prompted by the Government’s decision to pull a vote they knew they were going to lose last night. Does the Chancellor of the Exchequer not feel that he is completely out of kilter with the spirit of the modern age?

**John Glen:** Some amendments were tabled on Thursday, and given the constitutional implications of those amendments, I think it is right that the Government work across Departments—with the Ministry of Justice and the Foreign Office—and have dialogue with the Crown dependencies and overseas territories to resolve the matter as the amendments suggested.

**Ms Esther McVey** (Tatton) (Con): Adding to the calls of colleagues, may I ask the Chancellor to ensure that more money is provided for schools? Schools across the country desperately need it, particularly in Cheshire, which is the lowest funded.
Elizabeth Truss: In response to my right hon. Friend, I can say that one of the things we have done is to introduce a national funding formula to make sure schools funding is more fair across the country, and it is getting fairer every year. I would be delighted to meet her and other colleagues.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): The Chancellor has claimed that the best way to protect the public finances from a decline in the motor industry post-Brexit is to back the PM’s deal. The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders says the best way is for the Prime Minister to abandon her red lines and be part of a customs union. Who is right?

Mr Philip Hammond: As the Prime Minister has explained to the House many times, the deal that we have negotiated with the European Union provides for most of the benefits of a customs union, while still enabling the United Kingdom in certain circumstances to be able to strike trade deals with third countries. That is a win-win outcome, and the House should get behind it.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Is it the intention that we will be publishing our draft tariff schedule in the event of no deal before the meaningful vote?

Mr Hammond: I cannot give my hon. Friend a clear answer on a specific date, but soon as we are in a position to publish the tariff schedule, we will do so.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Personal debt is now higher than it has ever been in British history. Household debt is now also higher than it has ever been and has increased by nearly £1,000 in the past year alone. How sustainable is that?

John Glen: That is why the Government are concerned that the establishment of a single financial guidance body should happen quickly this year. Some £56 million is spent on debt advice to 530,000 people. This is an area I take very seriously, and I will be going to the credit union conference on Saturday to outline some more policy initiatives.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. As is normally the case, demand exceeds supply. I am sorry to disappoint remaining colleagues, but we are well out of time and we must now move on.
12.40 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Ind): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) is currently on maternity leave. She has served with great distinction as a member of the Select Committee on Health and as a spokesperson who is nationally recognised for her work on mental health. I am deeply concerned to hear that the Labour party has been seeking names to replace and oust her from her position on the Select Committee. Surely this is unacceptable and sends entirely the wrong message about how we value maternity leave in this place. I am very relieved that none of her former colleagues was prepared to be nominated in that way. May I seek your guidance, Mr Speaker, on that point and on the wider point that Select Committees are surely at their best when Members can leave their narrow party politics at the door rather than being a tool of the Whips Office?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for the point of order.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Ind) rose—

Mr Speaker: If it is, as I believe it to be, on the same matter, I will hear the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) and then I will respond to the two of them.

Joan Ryan: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. May I support the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), the Chair of the Health Committee? Members of this House have previously left their parties and become independent or changed party, and I understand from the House of Commons Library that they have remained on Select Committees, only coming off them if they expressed a wish to do so. That is clearly not the case here. May I seek your ruling on the fact that there is no precedent for political parties to seek to remove Members whom the House has said should remain on their Select Committees for the duration of the Parliament?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) and the right hon. Member for Enfield North for those points of order. On the very last point, and this is not in any sense a criticism, from my recollection there are precedents. The truth of the matter is that there are precedents for a lot of things in this place and that does not necessarily mean that such a course of action is right. I say that without prejudice to what colleagues might judge to be the merits of the right hon. Lady’s point of order as a whole. She has flagged up a very important issue. The points of order were raised, at least in part, to elicit a response, and I am grateful to the hon. Lady and the right hon. Lady for giving me notice of them. Procedurally, the position is certainly clear in my mind and I hope I can make sure that it is clear in everyone else’s.

Changes in membership of Select Committees are made by this House on debatable and amendable motions. For almost all Select Committees, such motions are moved on behalf of the Selection Committee by its Chair or another member of it. Under Standing Order No. 121, any Member intending to propose that a Member be discharged from a Select Committee shall give notice to the Member whom he or she proposes should be discharged from the Committee. In the first instance, I refer the hon. Lady and the right hon. Lady to the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin), namely, the Chair of the Selection Committee. I am not aware of any current plan to remove somebody from such a Committee, and I would not necessarily be aware if there were such a plan. Procedurally, what I have said is, I think, accurate and in so far as it contains advice, it is the fairest advice I can offer. I hope that is helpful to colleagues.

I think there was another point of order.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This morning, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions published a written statement outlining changes to social security, health and disability. By my calculations there are no fewer than nine announcements that will have a significant impact on hundreds and thousands of ill and disabled people, including, to name a few, changes to the personal independence payment assessment for pensioners; the introduction of a new integrated assessment framework for employment and support allowance, universal credit and PIP; seeking to extend contracts on the delivery of the work capability assessment; and another review of the Government’s manifesto commitments to get more disabled people into work, with little or no mention of improvements to the Access to Work scheme; a small-scale test into conditionality and sanctions; and commissioning yet more research into the understanding of the needs of disabled people.

Mr Speaker, the written statement is vague on detail and raises significant questions. It is vital that Members are given the opportunity to question the Secretary of State about the changes. Will you please advise me on how best we can ensure that the Secretary of State comes to this House and answers questions from Members?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for giving me notice of her intention to raise this matter. She asks me specifically how to ensure that the Secretary of State will address the House on it. The short answer is that, apart from departmental questions and in the absence of an Opposition day facility to probe the matter, the absence of which at present is a matter understood by Members across the House, the recourse would have to be either through an urgent question, conceivably an emergency debate or a debate to take place under the auspices of the Backbench Business Committee. Beyond that, only really an end-of-day Adjournment debate or a debate in Westminster Hall would allow the matter to be aired. Those are the options.

On the procedural question the hon. Lady raises, I have to tell her—unfortunately from her point of view, but it is something I do have to say from time to time—that it is under our procedures for Ministers to decide whether a statement is delivered in writing or orally in this Chamber and whether such statements, rather as with the granting of urgent questions, to which the Government decide who to field, are delivered by the relevant Secretary of State or by another dare I say it?—more junior Minister.
[Mr Speaker]

The hon. Lady has made clear that she finds it unsatisfactory in the case she describes. Those avenues are open to her if she wishes to pursue the matter, as I think she clearly does. My advice to her would be that she discuss this matter with colleagues in her shadow ministerial team. She might consider undertaking the short journey to the Table Office, where further advice will be available to her if she seeks it. I hope that that is helpful to her. I do understand that some of these matters will be very pressing, not just as far as she is concerned but as far as many colleagues are concerned, and there should be an opportunity to air them in the Chamber.

If there are no further points of order—I am grateful to the hon. Lady for hers—I will momentarily call Mr Alan Brown to make an application for leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration under the terms of Standing Order No. 24. The hon. Gentleman has up to three minutes in which to make such an application.

EU Exit Preparations: Ferry Contracts

Application for emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

12.48 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I wish to give formal notice to request an emergency debate under Standing Order No. 24 to discuss a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration, namely the latest developments in UK Government ferry contracts for no-deal preparations.

Good governance goes hand in hand with transparency and accountability, and to date we have seen absolutely none of that in relation to the Transport Secretary’s handling of the no-deal ferry contracts. In fact, every time more information has come out, more questions have been raised and have gone unanswered. In a point of order yesterday, I highlighted my frustration about the non-answers. Yesterday, the Health Secretary answered from the Dispatch Box and gave the same blithe responses as the Transport Secretary. It is simply not good enough. We have had a written ministerial statement, three urgent questions and several oral questions, including eight SNP questions at the last Transport questions, and all we have received are arrogant, condescending responses.

We are still to find out how Seaborne was identified as a suitable provider of what are supposed to be vital services in the event of a no-deal Brexit. It is a company with negative equity, no history of running ferry or freight services, no ships and no port agreements to run the ferry services, and Ramsgate port is still to be dredged to have the depth required for ferries. We were told that due diligence had been undertaken, but it turns out that the Department for Transport limited it. Then we learned that there were no financial guarantees, so when the possible backer walked away, the deal collapsed. We need to know how much of the £800,000 due diligence costs were spent on the abortive Seaborne contract.

The Transport Secretary’s lines of defence—that he was supporting a start-up company, and that cancellation did not matter because it would not cost the taxpayer money—stretch the phrase “inadvertently misleading the House” to the absolute limit. We were advised that direct negotiation was possible under regulation 32 of the Public Contracts Regulations 2015, which relates to an emergency situation brought about by unforeseeable events. Given that the Government claim to have been planning for a no-deal scenario for two years, how was this unforeseen? What legal advice was provided?

Eurotunnel took the Government to court and was paid an out-of-court settlement of £33 million. Why did the Government cave if they were confident of the legal position? Why is it now argued that the £33 million settlement is actually prudent planning for a no-deal Brexit and is required to keep our vital medicine supply chain going? We need clarity and a breakdown of compensation cost versus the so-called service improvement.

There is anger in the House, and Members have not had their queries answered. I am asking for this debate so that we can get the Transport Secretary to the Dispatch Box to provide real, meaningful answers.
Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman asks leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration—namely, the latest developments in UK Government ferry contract awards for no-deal preparations. I have listened carefully to his application, and I am satisfied that the matter raised is proper to be discussed under Standing Order No. 24.

Has the hon. Gentleman the leave of the House? [Interruption.] Somebody is objecting. [Interruption.] I do not want to be unkind to the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge), but I am not sure he altogether understands our procedures perhaps as well as he ought to do and as well as I do. In fairness, he is graciously conceding from a sedentary position that the threshold of 40 has been reached. I thank him for his courtesy.

Actually, you lot are ahead of yourselves. People tend to stand up before they need to. [Interruption.] Order. I am saying this because I believe in the public intelligibility and accessibly of our proceedings, which is important. If there is an objection, as there was from the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East, 40 Members or more must rise in order that the debate can go ahead. More than 40 Members have done, and therefore the Standing Order requirement has been satisfied.

Application agreed to (not fewer than 40 Members standing in support.)

Mr Speaker: The debate will be held today as the first item of public business after the ten-minute rule motion. The debate will last for up to three hours, and will arise on a motion that the House has considered the specified matter set out in the motion of the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun.

Well, Mr Brown. I hope, at least for now, that you are satisfied with the result of your prodigious efforts. The debate will come in due course.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Have you had any indications, given the current situation, of whether the Secretary of State for Health or the Secretary of State for Transport will be responding to the debate? It is important, given the detail of the matter to be debated in the House today.

Mr Speaker: I am happy to accommodate the right hon. Gentleman. The presence of the Secretary of State for Transport is not ornamental. He has come into the Chamber, and my very clear understanding from him is that he wishes to speak in the debate. My expectation is that he will speak relatively early.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Ahoy there!

Mr Speaker: Order. There is no need for the hon. Lady to chunter “Ahoy there!” from a sedentary position. That is very eccentric behaviour. It is not the sort of thing I would ever have done as a Back Bencher, I feel sure. We will leave it there. I welcome the Secretary of State to the Chamber.

BILL PRESENTED

GENDER-BASED PRICING (PROHIBITION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Christine Jardine, supported by Jo Swinson, Wera Hobhouse, Layla Moran, Stella Creasy, Jess Phillips, Tonia Antoniazzi, Hannah Bardell, Tom Brake and Jamie Stone, presented a Bill to prohibit the differential pricing of products and services that are substantially similar other than being intended for, or marketed to, a particular gender; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March, and to be printed (Bill 348).
Mr Speaker: We come now to the ten-minute rule motion, for which the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) has been waiting almost as patiently as he has been waiting for the Shipley bypass.

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for the succession of female heirs to hereditary titles; and for connected purposes.

Mr Speaker, you will know that I often argue that the law should treat everyone equally, irrespective of their sex, and where that does not happen, I speak out. For example, I have spoken out to highlight where men are treated much more harshly in the criminal justice system and about how badly women are treated by sharia councils. This Bill would deal with another area where women are treated unfairly for no reason other than that they are women. That is unacceptable and indefensible.

In 2013, male primogeniture was changed to absolute primogeniture in the Succession to the Crown Act 2013, following a report on the rules of royal succession prepared by the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee in 2011. The report also noted that women continued to be ineligible to succeed the majority of hereditary peers. My Bill would seek to extend the Succession to the Crown Act to include all hereditary titles through a straightforward piece of primary legislation consisting of just a few clauses. It would quite simply mean that daughters would be treated the same as sons for the purposes of succession. It seems to me to be a very natural step to take after amending the same principle for the royal family.

As a Conservative, I obviously resist change for change’s sake, but this amendment both should and could be made. Similarly, I was more than happy to see the ending of the centuries-old defence of marital coercion in criminal proceedings—a legal defence that had been available to married women only in one guise or another until recently.

As drafted, the Bill would not apply immediately where there is already a son due to inherit a title, and it would certainly not be retrospective. If there is currently a son in line for succession, that would remain the case.

I want to take the opportunity to thank Charlotte Carew Pole of Daughters’ Rights, who is the Public Member for the House of Lords and of the House of Lords as it sits, of me, belonging to a political party that fundamentally understand their frustration, it would be disingenuous and as an individual who is fundamentally opposed to the principle of state-sanctioned privilege, to allow this issue to go undebated on the Floor of this House. I thought I lived in the 21st century, and although I can commend those sitting in the Public Gallery who are seeking equality within the peerage, and although I understand their frustration, it would be disingenuous of me, belonging to a political party that fundamentally believes in the abolition of hereditary peerage in the House of Lords and of the House of Lords as it sits, and as an individual who is fundamentally opposed to the principle of state-sanctioned privilege, to allow this issue to go undebated on the Floor of this House.

If the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) believed in equality, he would not have given a 91-minute filibuster against the Istanbul convention on combating domestic violence. It is disingenuous, to say the least, that he should take 10 minutes on the Floor of the House of Commons to debate a so-called principle of equality in relation to privilege and the hereditary peerage. How are we to say to the women of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, especially those in their 50s seeking equal pensions, that we are giving equal rights to the privileged members of the peerage but not to them in seeking the money they paid in for their pension? I have said in WASPI debates in Westminster Hall and listened to Members—predominantly Government Members—say that they should look to their husbands to help them out. What about women who happen to be married to other women born in the 1950s? It is disingenuous to the core in terms of the principle of equality.
The hon. Gentleman talks about equality for those in the peerage. That would be the monarchy, princesses, duchesses, marchionesses, countesses, viscountesses and baronesses—big dames and ladies. They are few and far between in West Dunbartonshire, I can tell you that, Mr Speaker. The women of my community—the women who elected me and have participated in votes for women candidates in my constituency—would be appalled at the disingenuous nature of this equality. He talked about equality for all.

Mr Speaker: Order. I have allowed the hon. Gentleman to develop his argument, which he is doing with considerable eloquence and passion, but I have been unhappy about the frequency with which he has used the word “disingenuous”. I say that to him because it entails an attribution of dishonour to the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies). It would be better if he confined his argument to reasons why the Bill is a bad thing. He should not impugn the integrity of the hon. Member for Shipley. He has a dexterous facility with words and a versatile vocabulary, and he can express himself in other ways that would not incur the displeasure of the Chair.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I did not mean to attribute dishonour to the hon. Member, who is of course entitled to their opinion, as is every other Member of the House—but, for the record, I think he is talking tosh.

There is no equality when we embed privilege for those, be they men or women, who sit in the honoured position of their father—predominantly—being descended from someone who chopped somebody else’s head off in the 1100s. It is an extraordinary position that we should seek to enshrine privilege, whether it be on a man or a woman, in the hereditary peerage. It would be extraordinary in the 21st century if I and many other Members across the House, not just on the Opposition side, were to go unheard in their opposition not just to the peerage in that other place but to the principle of privileged state positions. It would be disingenuous—I use that word about myself, Mr Speaker—of myself and many Members in this House who fundamentally agree with me.

How has it come to pass that unaccountable, unelected Members of the House of Lords, be they male or female, and even—forgive me—members of the Church of England, can bring in legislation while being unaccountable to the citizens of this political state? This is not a matter of equality; it is a matter of inequality. They are unaccountable not only to the men who participate in votes but to the women of this country who fought and died for the right to participate in parliamentary democracy. It is an affront to parliamentary democracy for Members of that other place to have that state-authorised privilege.

I cannot stand here in all good conscience, or even sit on these green Benches, and not articulate a position with which many right hon. and hon. Members—and learned Members—agree. I am talking about Members on the Scottish National party Benches, in the Labour party and even in the Conservative party. How can I look my female constituents in the face and say we are fighting for equality for a privileged class? If we believe in creating equality, let us abolish the hereditary privilege of hereditary peerage. That would create a level playing field for every man and woman, however they identify—that might confuse the hon. Gentleman even more—who is a citizen in a liberal democracy.

The Bill cannot go unchallenged. We cannot sit here in the 21st century, 100 years after women gained the right to vote, and say that this is what equality is about. Equality should exist for us all. I show due regard to those who have campaigned for their rights as women in the familial position of the peerage. I understand their situation—it is an absolute outrage that they should even be in this position—but the principle still exists that privilege, no matter someone’s gender or gender identity, state-sanctioned against the majority of their fellow citizens, is not equality. It is fundamentally a position that none of us should agree with in the 21st century.

I know that you are keen to move on, Mr Speaker, so I will sum up. The hon. Gentleman will be delighted to hear that I will not push this to a vote, because I fundamentally understand the principle of those who have campaigned for the Bill. However, as I said earlier, it cannot be that, in a parliamentary democracy, we believe that someone whose father, in the 12th century, chopped somebody’s heid aff—not “head”, for Hansard’s benefit, but heid—should have a place of honour and economic privilege and political leverage in a parliamentary democracy. That is an affront to those who have campaigned to ensure liberty and dignity for all.

I belong to a political party that believes that citizenship, and equality of citizenship, should not be based on who your father was. It should not be based on your economic privilege. It should be based on the fact that you were born free, male or female, perhaps have a disability, or perhaps come from a minority ethnic community. Those who are part of a privileged society who are unaccountable, and held to be unaccountable, to the citizenry of this state should have no truck with telling me otherwise. They should get no inch, and they will not, from me or from my political party.

Question put (Standing Order No. 23) and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Philip Davies, Ms Harriet Harman, Sir Christopher Chope, Jess Phillips, Esther McVey, Christine Jardine, Tim Loughton, Mrs Maria Miller, Vicky Ford, Sarah Champion and Jo Swinson present the Bill.

Philip Davies accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March and to be printed (Bill 349).
EU Exit Preparations: Ferry Contracts

Emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

1.12 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the latest developments in the UK Government ferry contract awards for no-deal preparations.

May I first thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting the debate? You asked me earlier if I was happy now, and I was happy, but given that I had such a short time in which to prepare for the debate, I hope you will forgive me for doing a bit of cursing as well.

I am very glad to have secured the debate. We have a Transport Secretary who has tried to duck some important issues and has had to be dragged, kicking and screaming, to the Dispatch Box. We can see him saying, “Here we go yet again.” The head-shaking has started, and the chuntering: we are talking nonsense, and we do not understand anything. That is why this emergency debate has been granted.

Let me say to Conservative Members who objected to the debate that it is about transparency and accountability, and about how the Government are being run. They should share the concerns of Scottish National party Members about the lack of that transparency and accountability, and the fact that these no-deal preparations have been a pure and utter shambles.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Assuming that the hon. Gentleman wishes to respect democracy and therefore to deliver on the Brexit decision of the British people, may I ask what plans he has to ensure that life-saving, life-enhancing medicines will cross the English channel post Brexit?

Alan Brown: Well, let’s see. Perhaps I would ensure that no deal was off the table, so that there would be no hint of that cliff edge with no medicines coming through. That is what I would do to start with. We should also consider extending article 50, to try to give this incompetent Secretary of State’s predecessor committed to this project. It is taxpayer money, and not even directly a transport project. The hon. Gentleman mentioned transparency and accountability.

I have mentioned transparency and accountability. Let me record my thanks to the journalist who first broke the story about Seaborne Freight in the new year and to the Public Accounts Committee and the National Audit Office for the work that they have done so far in assessing the diligence. Members on both sides of the House have raised some important questions: for instance, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) first raised the matter of the likely illegal tendering process.

We have still to get to the bottom of the overall process. It started in secrecy; it has been shrouded in secrecy ever since; and the Transport Secretary’s non-answers and evasions have not helped us to secure any further clarity. His Department has form when it comes to procurement issues. I remember, years ago, the collapse of the west coast main line franchise, which came about following another court action challenge. That resulted in Virgin receiving a direct award to extend its services, which clearly does not provide the best value for money for the taxpayer.

If the Transport Secretary believes so much in competition and privatisation, we have to ask why so many rail franchises have received direct awards, because that is the complete opposite of competitive tendering. The Southern rail franchise model has clearly failed, and much of that failure has been due to the inaction of the Transport Secretary, and the fact that somebody just wanted to have a fight with the unions rather than trying to improve markets and get services up and running.

That is the background to some of the systemic procurement failings in the Department for Transport, and it brings us neatly to where we are now. When the information about the award of the Seaborne Freight contract first surfaced, it was almost like a sick joke. This was an emergency contract for a company to provide emergency services. The hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) referred to vital services to keep medicines running. The Government, and the Transport Secretary, chose to pick up a ferry company that had no boats, had negative equity of £374,000, and had no history of running ferry or freight services. Both Brian Raincock, one of the directors, and Ben Sharp, the chief executive, had had companies liquidated when they owed money to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. Raincock’s debt was £600,000. I remind the House that HMRC is, effectively, all of us taxpayers.

What, then, constituted the due diligence, and what red flags were identified at that time? We have still to hear the answers to those questions. It turned out—I touched on this earlier—that the due diligence heralded by the Transport Secretary was actually very limited. It was very high-level, that meant that it was not due diligence. The companies which carried it out confirmed that they could not make a proper assessment of the merits of Seaborne being given a supposedly vital contract.

We need to ask some questions, and the Transport Secretary needs to start answering. How on earth did Seaborne get hand-picked for direct negotiation, given the circumstances? Saying that it accounted for only 10% of the vital services is no answer. Saying that the Government were supporting a vital British start-up company is certainly not an answer. Why should we hand-pick start-up companies for vital emergency services? That makes no sense whatsoever. It was so wrong that it led to a £33 million settlement for Eurotunnel. The Transport Secretary is shaking his head. Hopefully he is managing to multi-task and listen to these points, and will respond to them at the Dispatch Box.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the £33 million for something that never materialised—the phantom ferry contract—is not dissimilar to the £30 million that the Secretary of State’s predecessor committed to the garden bridge? There is nothing to show for that either. It was not even directly a transport project. The hon. Gentleman mentioned rail upgrades. Vital rail upgrades elsewhere in the country were cancelled when the money was committed to this project. It is taxpayer money, and Members should not laugh at this appalling waste.

Alan Brown: I thank the hon. Lady for highlighting yet another miserable failure, with more money being thrown down the drain. It is interesting that Eurotunnel was paid £33 million for vital services, given that that
seems in one way or another to replace the contract of Seaborne Freight, which was given only £14 million. So we really do have to ask what extra we are getting for the £33 million, or is this all the compensation that Eurotunnel walks away with and the taxpayer has no chance of recouping? Again, the Transport Secretary really needs to explain this.

The Government have argued that direct negotiation was possible under regulation 32 of the Public Contracts Regulations 2015, which relates to emergency situations brought about by unforeseeable events. So, after more than two years of no-deal planning, we suddenly had an unforeseen event—an unforeseen event, however, that allowed such protracted negotiations and £800,000-worth of due diligence. I would like the Transport Secretary to explain how long those negotiations were ongoing in this supposedly emergency situation, because £800,000 of consultants’ money amounts to a fair bit of time in negotiation, so he needs to explain when the actual emergency situation kicked in.

The argument from the Dispatch Box was that Seaborne Freight would only receive the money if it delivered the service, but that misses the point, because if it did not deliver the service, the emergency service it was contracted for would not happen, and that would leave the Government in a right mess in terms of no-deal preparations. The Transport Secretary has also argued that Seaborne has not cost the taxpayer any money. Hopefully he will re-explain these figures, because I would like to know how £800,000-worth of due diligence, at least some of which was on Seaborne Freight, has not cost any money. How did going to court and defending the Government’s position not cost any money? How did an out-of-court settlement with Eurotunnel at £33 million not cost any money that was related to Seaborne, because I am pretty sure a key plank of Eurotunnel’s objections was the fact that the Transport Secretary gave an important contract to a company with no ships? Meanwhile Eurotunnel is a company that obviously provides successful cross-border services. It is no wonder it was at court.

I would also like to ask the Transport Secretary whether there are any more objections outstanding: any more risks of court action. In response to a written parliamentary question I was told that a limited number of representations were received. In my book, a limited number is more than one. We have already had one court case to date; are any more court cases pending?

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): None.

Alan Brown: Are we absolutely sure about that? Given the Transport Secretary’s ability to count, “A hae ma doots,” as they say.

The Transport Secretary has never been able to answer what the loss of the 10% Seaborne contract would actually mean for the impact on Dover? Dover is so sensitive that even 10% would have a massive effect. We have heard about the fact that a minute and a half to two minutes of additional checks per lorry could lead to 30-mile tailbacks. Fortunately, under the Transport Secretary’s competent planning for no deal, we know that the Government have planned for at least 10,900 lorries by doing an exercise involving 89 lorries, driving up and down the motorway! [Interjection.] Yes, and the bin wagons. So 89 lorries driving up the motorway and parking up at Manston airport successfully proves that this Government can handle no-deal preparations! I am relieved; I am happy at that. I hold to my faith in the Transport Secretary.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that according to reports what those lorries were mostly doing was sitting stationary while the drivers were drinking cups of coffee, I am sure they enjoyed the exercise anyway. This illustrates a key point, however: if the Government are seriously saying that they are ready for a no-deal Brexit, they need to up their game in what they are doing and show some level of competency. I do not see many Conservative Members wanting to justify that exercise or how the Government handled that.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. Does he share my concerns about the lack of planning for other ports around the country? The Department for Transport and Ministers have been very lackadaisical about making sure that, if there is a no-deal scenario, those ports will be able to operate?

Alan Brown: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. I assume she is speaking in particular about ports in the north-east of England, and it seems that the Department for Transport has not engaged with any of the Scottish ports either. This is all about mitigating things around Dover, which is fine as Dover is clearly the biggest and busiest port, but one way to mitigate the traffic impact at Dover would be to stop as much traffic as possible travelling from the north to the south and to look at these other ports, and doing some real strategic planning. Strategic planning is severely lacking from the Department for Transport.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I have listened to what the hon. Gentleman has been saying with great interest. He will understand that, as I represent the constituency of Dover, this subject is very dear to my heart. In any negotiation, we have to have contingency planning. That is very important and it is right that the Department for Transport takes measures to ensure that, if there are disruptions at France, as has been threatened by some French politicians, it has alternatives and different ways of getting goods in and out of the country notwithstanding that. Does he not think that in principle the Department for Transport was acting in the national interest?

Alan Brown: We could argue that in principle the Department for Transport was trying to do the right things in terms of contingency planning because, let’s face it, a no-deal Brexit could happen. But in practice, it has been a pure and utter failure—a shambles. That is the difference. Contingency planning needs to be absolutely that—putting in place proper, robust procedures for the contingencies. It is clear that that has not happened.

Charlie Elphicke: I am sure the hon. Gentleman has, like me, read with interest the National Audit Office detailed report into this. It goes through the decision...
making in the Department for Transport and it does not come across to me as highly critical. It highlights that

“The additional freight capacity is intended to allow government to prioritise the flow of critical goods into the UK and to enable imports to flow as freely as possible in the event of no deal.”

It has to be in the national interest that we make sure we get medicines and other critical goods into the country and that we are prepared for everyuality. Does he not accept that as a matter of principle—yes or no?

Alan Brown: I thank the hon. Gentleman for gamely trying to defend the Government position. Fair play to him; he is the only one willing to do that. I would like to see him argue to all the members of the Public Accounts Committee that that NAO report was reassuring and that the evidence it took was reassuring, because that is not what I have heard from PAC members. So again I disagree.

If this were a real and robust process, the Government would have defended themselves to the hilt in court. They would not have caved in and done an out-of-court settlement. Again, that is indicative of where the Government are and the lack of confidence they had once they were eight-balled by Eurotunnel.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I also read the NAO report said that warnings were ignored in the “rushed—ineffective” and “inappropriate” privatisation, creating “significant risks”, that it wasted £500 million and that the number of recalled prisoners skyrocketed. But that was about the Secretary of State’s careless probation service legacy. So he clearly has a track record. As a master of understatement, he said that those reforms had not worked as well as he had hoped.

Alan Brown: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I spoke earlier about the systemic procurement failures in the Department for Transport. It is clear there is a common thread between the systemic failure in the privatisation and procurement of probation services and the man who is now in charge at the Department for Transport, who is sitting here lackadaisically thinking everything is okay in the world and he is doing a fine job. I am sorry but that is not the case and that is not how it is seen in the wider country.

I will now return to some questions raised in the Chamber that have still not had satisfactory answers. The permanent secretary at the Department for Transport told the PAC that the Department had awarded Seaborne the contract before Arklow confirmed its backing. So the Transport Secretary needs to be able to provide further clarity on that. We return to the question: where were the written guarantees that he was supposedly assured about from Arklow before it walked away? It is shameful that it turns out that as far as we know no written guarantees were given by Arklow, yet when it walked away some of the most hard Brexiteers, the right-wing Brexiteers, said it was an Irish conspiracy because Arklow is an Irish company. That is shameful. It was the Department for Transport not doing its due diligence

Additionally, the director general at the Department for Transport said that it was no longer possible to complete procurement and operation for any large amount of further capacity across the channel before the end of March by either sea or rail. Can the Secretary of State explain that? Can he explain how the sudden £33 million settlement with Eurotunnel, if it is going to provide all these vital services at the end of March, stacks up against the fact that the previous argument was that the Department no longer had time to be able to source those additional services?

In relation to Seaborne Freight, the Secretary of State said that “we have spent no money on this contract.”—[Official Report, 11 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 619.]

I ask him once again if he could please spell out the real financial implications of that award to Seaborne Freight and the handling of the direct negotiations.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): At the risk of being called a Government nark—which I am not often called at the moment—I want to ask the Secretary of State another question. If this emergency debate is so important to Scottish nationalist party Members, where are they?

Alan Brown: I feel as though I have more friends in here than I would have down the pub on a Friday night. This is a really good turnout for the SNP. There are only 35 of us, so this is a good turnout. But wait a minute—I do not understand that intervention. Once we discount the Parliamentary Private Secretaries and Government Front Benchers, how many Conservative Back Benchers are in the Chamber? How many are rushing to speak in this debate and to defend the Government’s handling of this? That is the question that the right hon. Gentleman wants to ask himself.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I am sure my hon. Friend is aware that the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) is a leading member of the European Research Group, which advocates a no-deal Brexit. Given that, does he not understand that intervention. Once we discount the Parliamentary Private Secretaries and Government Front Benchers, how many Conservative Back Benchers are in the Chamber? How many are rushing to speak in this debate and to defend the Government’s handling of this? That is the question that the right hon. Gentleman wants to ask himself.

Mr Francois: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Alan Brown: I will give way once more.

Mr Francois: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his courtesy. Through him, I wanted to respond to the Labour gentleman sitting at the back there—[Hon. Members: “He’s SNP as well.”] Oh, I am so sorry. That means there are about 13 of them. I do apologise. Most members of the ERG are, as I speak, working towards how our country can be free, so they are otherwise engaged—
Mr Speaker: Order. There has been a certain amount of frivolity on the matter of attendance at the debate, but perhaps we can now return to the theme of the debate rather than having a constant competition as to who can be more amusing at others’ expense on the matter of attendance.

Alan Brown: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I shall return to the substantive point of procurement. I touched earlier on rail franchising. The Secretary of State always says that he believes in competition. If he believes in competition, why did he have this secretive direct negotiating process? What is competitive about that? How could that provide value for money for the taxpayer? Will he come to the Dispatch Box and justify the expenditure and give us a detailed rationale of how he has managed to provide any value for money for the taxpayer in this entire process?

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the ending of Seaborne’s contract has not in fact cost the taxpayer a penny?

Alan Brown: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, which proves either that she does not listen or that the Transport Secretary does not understand the meaning of spending money. It actually resulted in an out-of-court settlement of £33 million, in legal fees—we still have to hear how much—in further risk to the Government and in the due diligence costs. That seems to be quite a hefty expenditure loosely related to the Seaborne contract.

Charlie Elphicke: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Alan Brown: This is getting tiresome but, yes, once more.

Charlie Elphicke: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way one more time. I am glad to see Scottish MPs taking an interest in the matter of trade across the English channel. I am looking again at the NAO report, which makes it clear that the Department considered that it had to use a faster process. He castigates the Department for not advertising the contract and doing the usual procurement, but the report states:

“The Regulations also allow for the award of a contract through a ‘negotiated procedure without prior publication’,”

when time is of the essence. That is clearly what the Department did. Given the fact that the clock is ticking, it is hard to say that that was an unreasonable thing to do.

Alan Brown: I thank the hon. Gentleman for trying once more. The EU referendum was in June 2016, and as I have said, the Government are supposed to have been doing no-deal planning for over two years. So why did this suddenly become an emergency issue? At what point did the Transport Secretary go, “Oh shoot! We might have a no-deal Brexit! We need to put in some plans to deal with that.” So again I rebut the hon. Gentleman’s intervention. By the way, it is also a fact that the Transport Secretary did not even bother to visit the port of Dover until October 2018, even though it was supposed to be so critical. Why did it take him so long to go and see those operations in person?

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Was the hon. Gentleman as surprised as I was to hear that no costs had been incurred in this? He has highlighted the £800,000 that was paid out to consultants, but there was also the cost of dredging the port. We were told by the permanent secretary that that was paid for by Seaborne, yet the contract was cancelled. Is the hon. Gentleman as surprised as I am that Seaborne bore the cost of that itself—or was it borne by someone else?

Alan Brown: I am actually very surprised at that. I put in a written parliamentary question asking how much the Department for Transport had paid towards the dredging of the port at Ramsgate, and the answer I was given was that it had paid nothing, so I shall be challenging that further. We need to get to the bottom of this, because we know full well that that operation was not done for nothing and that the Transport Secretary was lobbying Thanet Council to keep the port open because of his negotiations with Seaborne. There is more to run on this, and I thank the shadow Secretary of State for bringing it up.

Returning briefly to Eurotunnel, we know that the out-of-court settlement was effectively a Government cave-in. The thing about that Government cave-in is that we have learned that they are going to keep 10,000 documents secret for reasons of commercial confidentiality, which will make it much harder for us to get to the bottom of this. We know that they had no confidence in their own position because they settled out of court.

We also need to understand why the Health Secretary came to the Dispatch Box yesterday to tell us that this was such an important contract as it would keep medicines coming into the UK. He said that that was why the Government had negotiated the £33 million settlement with Eurotunnel. He suggested that it was not about compensation but about vital services and improvements. I repeat that we need clarity on this. If that £33 million was related to the provision of vital services, why did Eurotunnel take the Government to court? Why was Eurotunnel not identified as a reputable provider before, when the Government were looking at Seaborne Freight? How much of that £33 million compensation for Eurotunnel has gone forever? What services are we going to see? What updates will the House be given on the progress of those vital services that the Government have procured?

The Transport Secretary has been lax on updating the House from start to finish. We had one ministerial statement at the outset, which he thought would head off the bad press about Seaborne Freight. We have subsequently had to table three urgent questions, and we are now having this emergency debate. And of course, he has sometimes not even turned up to the Dispatch Box. The fact that he is unwilling to come to the Dispatch Box, state his case clearly and leave himself open to questions from Members says everything about his confidence in his own competence.

A procurement matter that I touched on yesterday is that it looks as though Bechtel is going to sue the Government over the HS2 tendering process, so will the Secretary of State identify what other departmental risks exist in relation to procurement? What review of the procurement process has he instigated? Who is heading up the review and when will it report on this matter? It is quite clear that some sort of procurement review is absolutely vital.
I will finish by again describing the Transport Secretary’s litany of failures. We heard about the near £600 million cost of privatising the probation service following his time at the Ministry of Justice.

Chris Grayling: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm to the House that the probation service contracts are running around £1 billion under budget?

Alan Brown: I cannot confirm that. The right hon. Gentleman is quite comfortable with his legacy there, so I will leave that to him; what he said is on the record. No one else seems to appreciate his legacy, including the current Justice Minister, who is trying to deal with the mess.

Gavin Newlands: I cannot believe that the Transport Secretary stood up and defended his probation service reforms. I serve on the Select Committee on Justice, and the Ministers who replaced him and his team at the Ministry of Justice have said time and again that the service is a shambles. I am absolutely amazed that he stood up to defend it. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Alan Brown: I agree wholeheartedly. To be fair to the current Transport Secretary, he allowed VTEC, the Virgin-Stagecoach consortium, to walk away owing the taxpayer £2 billion and said that that was not a bail-out. If I let somebody off from owing me £2 billion, it would seem that I had bailed them out. As I touched on earlier, he also has a lot of culpability in the Southern rail franchise and in how the model was set up, and he has been unwilling to get involved in industrial disputes. In fact, in a way he wanted the disputes to continue because of his views on the unions. We had the Northern rail timetable farce, where the Government again tried to argue that the taxpayer was not liable. Network Rail pays compensation to a franchise holder, that money comes from the taxpayer. All that is in addition to the £800,000 on due diligence and the out-of-court settlement with Eurotunnel. It has been a farce from start to end, but the Transport Secretary is not willing to accept accountability.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): When hearing these lists about how the opposite of the Midas touch has affected so many aspects of public policy, we should not forget the introduction of English votes for English laws, which was undertaken when the Transport Secretary was the Leader of the House. EVEL turns the House into a shambolic laughing stock whenever we try to use it.

Alan Brown rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must confine himself to the subject matter of today’s debate, the terms of which have been specified and which the Secretary of State will answer. This cannot be a general ad hominem attack on the Secretary of State or a replay of other matters that happened at an earlier point in the Secretary of State’s career to which Members want to object.

Alan Brown: I will take your guidance, Mr Speaker, and perhaps spare the Transport Secretary any more of his litany of failures.

The right hon. Gentleman has already survived what was effectively a vote of no confidence, but I have several times called for him to be sacked, as has the shadow Transport Secretary, and he should do the right thing and step aside. It is abundantly clear that his handling of this shambles has been truly shameful. I will be interested to hear what he says at the Dispatch Box, but I have no confidence in his handling of this matter and he really should think about walking.

1.43 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): As I have explained to the House on several occasions, the Government entered into contracts with ferry operators to provide additional ferry capacity and services into the UK as part of no-deal contingency planning. However, as we have heard clearly this afternoon, the reality is that the SNP does not believe in preparing for no deal. Even though the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) accepts that it is a possibility, a risk and a danger, he does not support us in preparing for the risk of a no-deal exit—[Interruption.] The Labour Front-Bench team say, “Take it off the table,” but we can only take no deal off the table by reversing Brexit or agreeing a deal. The reality is that Labour and the SNP have spent week after week trying to prevent a deal, voting against the deal and trying to disrupt the process of getting towards a deal. Frankly, they are acting in anything but the national interest in doing so. We, however, have been acting in the national interest in preparing for all eventualities.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): If the Secretary of State really believes that no deal should be an option, why on earth did the Government not begin preparations sooner?

Chris Grayling: We have been preparing for a no-deal exit for months and months. There was a particular reason, as I will set out in a moment, for this particular procurement at this particular time, but my Department has been working for months to prepare for the risk of no deal. That can be seen in the new international aviation agreements, in Kent, where we have put in alternative resilience systems to the deeply disruptive Operation Stack, and in many other things.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): It is not just here that we see the Opposition parties not acting in the national interest, because the same applies to statutory instruments. It is a constant refrain. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the only way of taking no deal off the table is by voting for the Prime Minister’s deal? It is time for the Opposition parties to put narrow party politics aside.

Chris Grayling: Absolutely. All that we have heard for months is, “Why are the Government getting this wrong?” but we have had no tangible or realistic plans from the Opposition. At every opportunity, they simply work to disrupt the Brexit process. Labour stood on a manifesto that respected the referendum result, but the party is doing anything but respecting the result. If it continues to disrupt the Brexit process, it will pay a heavy price in its heartlands, where people voted for Brexit.

Charlie Elphicke: I have been reading the NAO report with considerable interest, and it says:

“Over the summer of 2018, government departments stepped up their contingency preparations for no deal.”
The truth of the matter is that Government policy changed in summer 2018 to step up contingency planning, so the Department for Transport acted from that point onwards because wider Government policy had changed from that point onwards.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, although I must say that we started some of our planning well before then. However, it is certainly the case that last summer, as we saw the progress in the negotiations, the Government stepped up their preparations for no deal, as any responsible Government should. It is quite extraordinary that the Labour party seems to believe that we can just wave a wand and take no deal off the table. We have voted to leave the European Union, and we will either leave the European Union with a deal or without a deal, or we will reverse Brexit. Those are the only three options.

Mr Francois: It is right that Government did indeed step up their no-deal preparations, as my right hon. Friend has quite rightly told the House, but one of the points of debate has been the speed at which the Chancellor of the Exchequer has been prepared to release funding to individual Departments to facilitate those preparations. Does my right hon. Friend think it would be helpful in future if the Chancellor were to lean forward a bit more to ensure that all preparations are fully funded in good time?

Chris Grayling: I will leave my right hon. Friend to make his point, because I do not want to start debating discussions within the Government.

The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun asked why we started this procurement when we did. As I have said, we and the national health service had been preparing for disruption at the ports last spring. However, based on the negotiations, on comments coming from Brussels and on what we saw happening on the other side of the channel, the analysts changed that assumption last autumn and recommended that Government prepare for a longer period of disruption.

At that point, the Department of Health and Social Care rightly highlighted the fact that that would put significant pressures on their stockpiles of drugs. The Government therefore collectively decided following discussions in Cabinet Committees to go to the ferry industry to secure capacity to guarantee the delivery of drugs to this country in the event of a no-deal Brexit. That was a collective decision, and it was the right decision. We talked to all the current ferry operators working across the North sea and the English channel, plus any other operator with tangible plans to do so. That is where the procurement came from.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Is this not the key question, however? Did the right hon. Gentleman have advice from his officials that negotiations solely with ferry companies would result in a legal challenge by Eurotunnel, which ultimately he has now paid off with a £33 million investment from taxpayers?

Chris Grayling: We knew, in accelerating the procurement process, that there was a legal risk. That has been highlighted in the NAO report. However, it was my judgment, the judgment of my accounting officer and the judgment of those who vetted the plan across the Government that that was a risk that we should take, given the need to ensure that we had a supply of drugs into the country in the event of a no-deal Brexit.

David Hanson: The right hon. Gentleman has said that there was a legal judgment that there was an element of risk. He took that risk, and his actions have therefore cost the state £33 million.

Chris Grayling: We took a collective decision, in the light of the legal advice, which was taken by me, by my accounting officer, and by those who approved this across the Government, and we did so—[Interruption.] We did so because we judged it important to ensure that we had a proper supply of drugs to the NHS in the event of a no-deal Brexit. I challenge Labour Members, as they chunter from the Front Bench, to say that they disagree with ensuring a supply of drugs to the UK in a no-deal Brexit.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I have been listening very intently to what the right hon. Gentleman has been saying. The thing that really surprises and shocks me is the fact that there is a complete lack of humility with regard to the fact that £33 million of public money—taxpayers’ money—has been wasted. Could he just stand up and say sorry to them?

Chris Grayling: I very much regret the fact that we were taken to court. It was a risk that we acknowledged was there, but I stand by the decision to make sure that we could guarantee the supply of drugs to the NHS in the event of a no-deal Brexit.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that proper preparation is an important role of the Government, and that frightening people unnecessarily, particularly those who are vulnerable and dependent on medicines, such as those with epilepsy, is completely irresponsible and unkind? Can he confirm to my constituents that the medicines will be available, regardless of whether we have no deal or Brexit on the Prime Minister’s deal?

Chris Grayling: I can absolutely confirm that, and I think it is absolutely right and proper that we took the steps necessary to ensure that continuity of supply. We did so with a collective decision across the Government, taken by Cabinet Committees.

Andy McDonald: Does the Secretary of State not understand and accept that today he is laying bare the advice that he received—and that he acted in contravention of that advice and he lost? We are not asking for an absence of preparation for contingencies; we are asking for a modicum of competence, and he has singularly failed.

Chris Grayling: We did not receive legal advice saying, “Do not do this.” We received legal advice saying that there was a risk in taking the approach, and we judged collectively across the Government that it was a necessary risk to take in the national interest.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP) rose—
Charlie Elphicke rose—

Chris Grayling: I am going to make a bit of progress, because I have given way many times.

Let me touch briefly on the issue of Seaborne Freight, which was raised exhaustively by the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun, and on which I have answered question after question in the House. First, to be clear, the agreement with Eurotunnel was not about the contract with Seaborne Freight; it was about the procurement process, and particularly about the continuing contracts that we have with Brittany Ferries and DFDS for additional ferry capacity into the UK, to provide us with resilience. I have spoken exhaustively in the House about Seaborne Freight. I am disappointed that the contract had to be terminated. I stand by the decision to give that company a chance, particularly since it was backed by Ireland’s biggest shipping firm at the time. We have, as a Government, paid no money at all to Seaborne.

The hon. Gentleman keeps asking me about spending money on due diligence. We spend money on due diligence for contracts that we do not award as well as for contracts that we do award, because rightly and properly in government due diligence is applied to a tender of any sort. That is what we did in this case, and what we do in all other situations. That, again, is the right thing to do.

So it is absolutely clear—I want to be absolutely clear—that when it comes to the Eurotunnel litigation, the settlement struck between the Government and Eurotunnel was separate to the issue of the Seaborne debate, and it was stuck, I think, in a way that is designed to ensure that the taxpayer actually receives value through the addition of important facilities at the border that will smooth the flows.

Joanna Cherry: On that point, will the Secretary of State give way?

Chris Grayling: It was a challenge to the procurement process, on which I said I took detailed legal advice at the time of procuring, which I and my accounting officer took into account when awarding these contracts. We expected that if a legal challenge were brought, any court determination would be brought well after Brexit and would not disrupt the process. All this, as the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun will be aware, has already been looked at by the National Audit Office. We have invited it to take a further look, but I stand by the decisions that we took.

These decisions were not simply taken by me and by my Department; they were decisions taken collectively, in the national interest.

Joanna Cherry: Can the right hon. Gentleman confirm, just for the record, that not a single penny of the £33 million paid out to Eurotunnel will be returned in the event that there is a deal?

Chris Grayling: The deal that we have done is to pay for additional facilities at the border, to create a smoother flow at the border. That is something that we will benefit from at the borders.

Joanna Cherry: You are not telling the truth.
national interest, and particularly patients in our national health service, first—and that, Mr Speaker, you would expect any responsible Government to do.

1.58 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): It is good to see the Transport Secretary finally in his place today, after I tried and failed to bring him to the House yesterday. Instead he sent the Health Secretary as his human shield, but that came as no surprise, considering how the Transport Secretary has made a habit of treating this House with disdain. Perhaps he will reflect upon that.

I thank the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) for securing this debate. Understandably, the Health Secretary was not able to answer the questions put to him yesterday, so I am going to have another go at getting some answers out of the Transport Secretary, but I am not holding my breath. In the papers filed at court in the weeks before the case was due to be heard, the Government lawyers described Eurotunnel’s case as “embarrassing”. They were bullish and confident, yet in the early hours of the morning of 1 March a settlement was reached between the Government and the company. This sequence of events raises many still unanswered questions.

Joanna Cherry: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is at least an apparent conflict between the reported out-of-court settlement of £33 million and the Secretary of State’s claim that the £33 million is to pay for “improved security”, and that we ought to be trying to get to the bottom of whether that is accurate?

Andy McDonald: The hon. and learned Lady makes the point well.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I understand that the hon. Gentleman is about to turn to some of the questions he would like the Secretary of State to answer, but does he agree that one of them should be about the due diligence process that was carried out? The company that carried out that due diligence says that it could not ask the normal questions of Seaborne Freight because it was such a new entity. So how could the Government be in any way confident in their risk aversion in awarding that contract to Seaborne in the first place?

Andy McDonald: That is a very good question, and I have raised the point myself. Those who were inquiring into the bona fides of these companies were restricted in the scope they were given. Why on earth they did not look into the track record of the individuals concerned at Seaborne is beyond me, as these things are well known. A mere cursory search of Google tells us about the track record of Ben Sharp in his dealings in the Gulf, but seemingly that was not considered. The hon. Gentleman makes the point well.

Let me return to the settlement that was achieved on 1 March. I want to know why the Department for Transport was so confident about winning the case only a week before. What brought the sudden change in strategy towards the legal challenge? The Department clearly thought it could win. Who intervened? What was the view taken by other Departments—the Department of Health and Social Care, the Treasury and Downing Street? Why did they take a different view from the Department for Transport? Why did the Government not settle earlier? Why did they leave it so late? Why did they continue to employ Monckton Chambers and a QC and two barristers, who do not come cheap? How much was spent on this case, both on Government legal fees and Eurotunnel’s fees? Will the Secretary of State say who made the decision to settle with Eurotunnel over the £33 million provision of emergency medical supplies in the event of no deal?

Chris Grayling: I will give a very specific answer to that question: a Cabinet Committee.

Andy McDonald: I am grateful for that clarification that it took a Cabinet Committee to make such a mess of things. Can the Secretary of State specifically say what is in this standard settlement—or are there other clauses within it? Ordinarily, when such cases are settled, they are done by reference to a consent order, in which there would be a paragraph dealing with the sum of money to be paid. In these circumstances, it may say “£33 million” and it may say the date upon which that sum is to be paid. It may also say that the costs are to follow the event. So we want to know the answers to those questions.

Joanna Cherry: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it would be highly unusual in an out-of-court settlement for the party settling to stipulate how the party receiving the settlement would spend the money?

Andy McDonald: I absolutely agree with the hon. and learned Lady on that. Having been in practice for the thick end of 30 years, I have never entered into a settlement where the defendant has told me what I am going to spend the money on. That is absolutely ludicrous, so we need to know the answers.
Andy McDonald: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that revealing clarification about the obvious chaos that the Government are in over these important issues. They do not speak with a concerted and singular voice, and people are falling out with each other left, right and centre. That comes as no surprise to me whatsoever.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman clearly has a lot more experience than I do in matters of collective responsibility. Let us take the previous intervention at its word. If a Secretary of State is clear that the collective responsibility of the Government is preventing him or her from doing the job properly, is not the only honourable course of action for that Secretary of State to resign? So what the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) has done by speaking in his defence is say that the Secretary of State should not resign now, as he should have resigned months ago.

Andy McDonald: That is a fair observation. We have heard that the Secretary of State was prevented from undertaking contingency planning in the first place because of disputes in the Government and that it took the Government to make a collective decision because nobody could come forward to take a decision on this settlement themselves. That really does characterise a Government in chaos and meltdown. Can the Secretary of State say which Departments contributed towards the £33 million? Yesterday, the Health and Social Care Secretary did not know whether his Department had contributed, so will the Transport Secretary please clarify which Department or Departments paid that bill?

Charlie Elphicke: Although I do not agree with the action that Eurotunnel took, it has to be said that this £33 million is clearly being invested in border infrastructure. I would like to see and have been calling for similar investment in Dover. Does it not occur to the hon. Gentleman that this money could have been very well spent as “no regrets” spending to improve our border security and trading links?

Andy McDonald: I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that that is a ridiculous proposition. Is he saying for a single second that this is wise investment and that it takes a court case for people to come to the right conclusion about investing in our border provision? Is he really suggesting that that is the way to drive public policy? Is he suggesting that we drive Government policy through the litigation process, whereby a claimant puts a case to the Government to say, “This is what you should do”? He cannot possibly sustain that as an argument.

Charlie Elphicke: The hon. Gentleman is making a facile point. My point is simply that the Secretary of State, confronted with opportunism, has made the best of a bad job to make sure that the investment is used to the good of the country, not to fatten the profits of Eurotunnel. In a difficult situation, he has done the right thing, trying to act in the national interest while being consistently undermined by the Labour party, the Scots Nats party, the TIGgers and everyone on the Opposition Benches, who have been continually trying to undermine this country’s leaving the European Union.

Andy McDonald: If the hon. Gentleman really thinks that expending £33 million when the Government did not want to or need to is a sensible way forward and a sign of success, I really do not want to see what failure looks like. That is outrageous. Saying that £33 million was the maximum amount to be paid implies that payment was conditional on particular outcomes being achieved. There is a lack of clarity on whether the Government can claw back money from Eurotunnel if it is not used on Brexit preparations. So do such provisions exist?

On that point, was the permanent secretary at the DIT correct to say of the Seaborne contract award: “I am confident that our process was lawful, and obviously the Secretary of State did not know whether his Department had contributed, so will the Transport Secretary please clarify which Department or Departments paid that bill?”

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The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care was wrong to claim that yesterday’s urgent question was directly related to the Seaborne contract. He did not explain why, if it was not related, as he stated, an agreement was reached with Eurotunnel now rather than in November or December. It is one way or the other.

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman wants to get to his feet to retract that comment, so I will let him intervene again.

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DFDS and Brittany Ferries. I wish that at some point he would be frank with the House and explain the full gamut of what we are talking about.

Andy McDonald: That is not the first time the Secretary of State has put up this false argument, as if 10% of the goods flowing into this country through these ports and by this method are somehow irrelevant and unimportant. It is a ludicrous proposition. If damage was caused to by this method are somehow irrelevant and unimportant. It is a ludicrous proposition. If damage was caused to 10% of the trade coming in, we would be in an incredibly difficult position.

Chris Grayling: rose—

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Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman cannot add up. This contract brought 8% of the equivalent, in total, with DFDS and Brittany Ferries, and the contingency buffer was made up by Seaborne on the basis of buying tickets in advance that we would not pay for unless the ship sailed.

Andy McDonald: I cannot add up? I really think that is pot calling kettle. The Secretary of State has not been able to count for years; he is costing us a fortune.

Andrew Dean from law firm Clifford Chance warns that this may not be the end of the matter. Mr Dean, who used to advise the DFT and is a procurement specialist, says it is quite likely that the Eurotunnel deal will be challenged. What contingency planning has been done in relation to such a challenge, and what public funds, if any, have been allocated as part of such plans? The Secretary of State talks about having received legal advice and listened to it; perhaps he could tell the House what advice he has received about the risk of yet further satellite litigation because of the deal he has done.

The Government talk about the UK maritime industry being market-led. Is it not the case that the Secretary of State’s blundering interventions have directly undermined the industry? He promised to ensure continuity of supply for six months in the event of a no-deal Brexit. Key to that was not increasing traffic around Dover, yet the Eurotunnel/Getlink route still goes through the same bottleneck road network on either side of the channel.

The Secretary of State appears to be puzzled by the anger of the House. Allow me to explain why Members and the public are so furious: this latest fiasco would be enough to warrant the resignation of the Secretary of State even if it were an isolated incident, but it is not a one-off; rather, it is the latest costly error in a series of blunders—blunders that could have been avoided were a different, more competent Secretary of State in post.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making a really good point, but my constituents are also very cross about the sheer waste of money in all this, and at a time when we are told that there is not the money to properly fund our schools and hospitals or social care services, yet the Prime Minister, who keeps him in post because she is short of allies in the Cabinet. The country is being made to pay a heavy price for her political weakness. This would be unacceptable at any time—

Chris Grayling: This is really poor.

Andy McDonald: The right hon. Gentleman says, “This is really poor” from a sedentary position, and I agree with him: this is really, really poor. It would be unacceptable at any time, but it is especially outrageous following the years of austerity and neglect that have left our towns and communities hollowed out and our public services in crisis.

Joanna Cherry: The hon. Gentleman is giving an excellent speech. Does he agree that if the SNP Government in Edinburgh or the Labour Government in Cardiff were guilty of this sort of profligacy with public money, we would never hear the end of it from Conservative Members?

Andy McDonald: The hon. and learned Lady is exactly right: it is one rule for the Tory party and another for everyone else. [Interruption.] No, it is not a funny issue. The right hon. and hon. Members on the Government Front Bench would condemn such waste, and with some justification; they really cannot complain when other people hold them to account for their continuous errors and wastefulness.

There are now 8 million working-age adults in poverty, while child poverty has grown to more than 4 million and rising: councils have had their funding slashed by half; violent crime is rising; and school budgets are seeing cuts for the first time in 20 years. In my constituency and many others throughout the country, there is appalling poverty and people are struggling. We are told that there is not the money to properly fund our schools, hospitals or social care services, yet the Prime Minister always finds the money to indulge the Secretary of State’s latest blunder. A further £1.9 billion has been spent on planning for a damaging no deal. For some, it seems, austerity is over. It is one rule for Tory Ministers and another rule for the rest of us. This cannot be allowed to continue. On behalf of the country, I implore the Secretary of State to resign.
2.18 pm

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) on securing this debate. He has been far more efficient and effective than the official Opposition, who did not seek this opportunity.

It seems to me, representing one of the channel ports as I do, that the issue is that the people of Britain voted to leave the European Union. Some 17.4 million people voted to leave and we need to make a success of it. They voted to leave because they believed in Britain and in the kind of land of opportunity that we could build. They believed in the kind of future that we could make outside the European Union. That vote needs to be respected.

Having backed remain myself, after the vote I listened to my constituents, who said, “Let's leave,” and I spent a lot of time on contingency planning. Two years ago, I set out a detailed report about how we needed to be ready on day one, deal or no deal; how we could overhaul our entire customs systems, our road infrastructure and our border infrastructure; and how that investment would be no-regret spending because a more efficient border system would provide economic growth. That is not just my case; it is what Jon Thompson, head of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, said in evidence to the Treasury Committee when I raised the possibility of a single Department for borders. That is why I say that it is no-regret spending to invest in our borders, our border security and our border systems.

The shadow Secretary of State rejects as absurd the view that we should make such an investment. No doubt it would not be made by a Labour Government—they did not make it last time, so they would not do it now. They are not serious about border security, and they have a leader who believes that every single migrant should be allowed to wander into the country.

Andy McDonald: In case the hon. Gentleman wants to cite my words accurately, I said that the litigation route was a peculiar way of going about investing in infrastructure. Waiting until somebody sues us before we decide what to do—surely to goodness, that is not the way we should go about business when developing policy in this country.

Charlie Elphicke: The Labour party failed completely to invest in many things, including border infrastructure, when it was last in power, and it has not been serious about border security and border control ever since.

Dr Caroline Johnson: Did my hon. Friend note, as I did, that under the stewardship of the last Labour Government, the UK transport system fell from seventh best in the world to 33rd? Perhaps that is an indication of how well the Labour party would look after our transport system in the future—if it gets the opportunity, which I hope it will not.

Charlie Elphicke: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This Government have invested substantially in transport. I believe we need more investment in roads to the ports, as has been set out in transport reports, and in infrastructure at our ports. It is so important, particularly as we leave the European Union, that we invest in our trading systems and ensure that the ferries, the channel tunnel and all other logistics work efficiently, swiftly and well. That is why, two years ago, I set out the fact that we needed to plan to be ready on day one, deal or no deal.

Alan Brown: I welcome the hon. Gentleman’s congratulations on securing this emergency debate, which suggests that he agrees that it is needed because the Government are not answering questions properly. He is making a point about contingency planning; I respect the fact that he is talking about planning ahead two years ago and about no-regret spending. Does he know any more than other hon. Members present about what security improvements are coming after the £33 million settlement with Eurotunnel? The Transport Secretary certainly has not explained them.

Charlie Elphicke: I do not represent the tunnel, which is in Folkestone and Hythe; I represent Dover. However, I have been keen to press the Secretary of State to ensure that Dover receives similar investment and that it does not lose out, and I look forward to his confirmation that that will be the case.

Sir Edward Leigh: Away from the party games, we all know that the problems in the British transport system are so intractable that any Secretary of State would face them. Many Conservative Members think that if the rest of the Cabinet had listened to my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary two years ago and started no-deal planning at the time, not only would the EU have taken us seriously and offered a much better deal, but we would not have made the mistakes that have clearly been made. It is not the Transport Secretary’s fault.

Charlie Elphicke: I thank my hon. Friend for making exactly the point that I am coming to. I set out how we needed to invest to be ready on day one, deal or no deal; as I argued at the time, to get the best negotiation, we needed to be able to get up and walk away from the table. I also set out detailed legal reasons why we did not owe any of the divorce bill—another point that was important to our negotiation.

The Government as a whole—the Cabinet—decided not to spend money at that time. The Cabinet decided not to invest at that time. The Cabinet decided not to take forward contingency planning at a substantial level until after the Chequers discussions. To visit that on the Secretary of State would not be fair, right or proper.

Joanna Cherry rose—

Peter Grant rose—

Charlie Elphicke: I have given way quite a lot, so I will make some progress.

The Secretary of State has worked hard in the national interest to make sure that contingency plans, once authorised, have been taken forward. I pressed him on the point, because I wanted to see a new route from Dover to Zeebrugge in Belgium, but it would have required a level of intervention that is difficult under the procurement rules. As it was, he undertook procedures that were known within the Department to be legally risky, but were seen as being in the national interest because of the time available. I have to agree that that decision was in the national interest. It would have been
very easy for the port of Dover to go for an opportunistic legal action on the basis that it was being shut out of the process, but it would not have been the right thing to do.

Everyone across the country could see what the Secretary of State was trying to achieve: to take pressure off the port of Dover and the channel tunnel in case there were difficulties with France. That was a concern at the time because of the kind of rhetoric that was coming from the French President, Monsieur Macron. Now that things have moved on and we know that the European Union will extend transit on a no-deal basis, the risk of such difficulties is much less, but that was not known at the time. It is right that the Secretary of State and the Department take measures based on the information before them.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am listening to my hon. Friend’s speech with quite some interest. If he had to choose between the risk of potential legal action and the risk of no medicines for our NHS, would he make the same choice as the Secretary of State?

Charlie Elphicke: Therein lies the heart of this debate. The Opposition are saying that the Secretary of State should not have taken this action at all. They are attacking him for taking contingency planning measures. The kernel of their argument is that he was wrong to take them. I think that that is incredibly opportunistic. As I said, he may or may not have been allowed out of the traps as early as many of us in this House would have liked, but once he was away, he took the measures that were necessary.

Beyond the whole issue of contingency planning, some important improvements are needed in our country. The reason we need contingency planning is that we have not invested in our border systems and infrastructure as perhaps we might have done in the past. To set out the case for my constituents and the people of Kent, we need to ensure that our infrastructure is better prepared, because—irrespective of Brexit—we have big queues in Kent and problems on the ferries and in the tunnel.

Contingency planning or no contingency planning, there needs to be investment in more lorry parking in Kent, and the Department for Transport needs to be more effective in taking it forward. The roads to the port need upgrades. In particular, the A2 dualling, which was taken out of the programme by John Prescott in 1997 as one of the cuts in the early days of the then Labour Government, is long overdue and needs to be brought back as quickly as possible. It is also incredibly important that contingency plans work on a balanced basis between the tunnel and the port of Dover.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that our case is not that the Government as a whole should have released the funds and made the decision to invest in our borders. Irrespective of this debate and of Brexit, that investment is in the national interest because our country will benefit from having more efficient, effective, safe and secure borders and from more efficient trading systems. Fewer people will come into the country unlawfully, and people who are here unlawfully can be helped back to where they have come from.

We need to ensure that our trading systems are efficient and effective not just for our trade with Europe, but for the trade that we already do under World Trade Organisation terms. The more efficient we make them, the more economic growth we will get. Again, those are not my words, but those of Jon Thompson in evidence to the Treasury Committee—and he runs HMRC.

Alan Brown rose—

Charlie Elphicke: I will give way one last time.

Alan Brown: Given that the hon. Gentleman’s robust defence of the Transport Secretary is that the fault lies not with him but with the entire Government, who does the hon. Gentleman think should resign over this fiasco?

Charlie Elphicke: I am saying that the Secretary of State is not at fault, but neither are members of this Government. It is too many Members of the House of Commons who are at fault for not heeding the votes of 17.4 million people who say that we should leave the European Union at the end of March. It is about carrying into effect the referendum mandate, which the Scottish National party, the Labour party, the Liberal Democrats and the TIGgers have continually declined to do and sought to stop at every single turn. This House should respect the decision of the British people because this House asked the British people to make that decision; and that decision, having been made, should be respected.

People in this House are at fault, and they know who they are. To a person, those people know that they have not been doing their bit to ensure that we carry into effect the democratic will and decision of the British people. It is entirely shameful of the Opposition parties to have opportunistically attacked this Secretary of State, when the whole House knows that the Secretary of State has been working hard and doing his bit in the national interest to ensure that Brexit is a success and that we are ready on day one at the end of March.

2.30 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) for securing this important debate. It is interesting to follow the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke), who asked us to respect the decision of the people. Well, SNP Members respect the decision of our constituents and the people of Scotland, who voted 62% to remain, and we will continue not just to respect that, but to stand here and defend their decision. The hon. Gentleman spoke about this utopia voted for by the people who wanted to leave—this wonderful place that would be the UK out of Europe. However, he failed to recognise that people voted to leave because they were neglected, forgotten and ignored for years and years. The Tory party had not been invested in and, as a result, there was a vote. But it was a vote of anger and protest, not for the mess that we are currently in.


During yesterday’s urgent question on the Eurotunnel payment, the Secretary of State for Health insisted 24 times—I have been through Hansard—that these contracts were about the unhindered supply of medicines. He also went on to say:

“I find it astonishing that Members on the Opposition Benches continue to make the case that this is not about medicines; it is all about medicines”—[Official Report, 4 March 2019; Vol. 655, c. 710.]

I just wonder what part of the contingency planning process awards contracts to a company that has no ferries, when this is all about the vital supply of medicines. It makes no sense whatever.

Given that the Secretary of State for Health yesterday answered questions for his pal, the Secretary of State for Transport, I assume that there will be a reciprocal agreement today. I hope that the Secretary of State for Transport, before he leaves, will answer some questions about health. If this is all about the unhindered supply of medicines, we need him to answer some questions about medicines. In particular, I want him to answer some questions about medical radioisotopes. I have been asking about this issue for more than two years without any proper information coming forward. I asked yesterday, and I previously asked a fortnight ago during Health questions on 19 February. It is a shame not to see the Health Secretary here today as he is so good on transport. On 19 February, he said that any issues with the supply of radioisotopes would be dealt with because the radioisotopes would be brought in by air. He also said that this planning was at an advanced stage. That was a really useful statement. If this contingency planning is indeed at an advanced stage, I would be keen to hear about the arrangements—about what is actually happening to ensure that we have radioisotopes for medical diagnosis and cancer treatment.

Most of our medical isotopes currently come through Dover or Coventry airport. If we assume that they are going to be coming through Coventry in the event of problems at Dover, we can also assume that there is expertise there to deal with it. Coventry airport deals with isotopes efficiently and effectively at the moment, but has there been increased capacity planning? I asked yesterday, and I previously asked a fortnight ago during Health questions on 19 February. It is a shame not to see the Health Secretary here today as he is so good on transport. On 19 February, he said that any issues with the supply of radioisotopes would be dealt with because the radioisotopes would be brought in by air. He also said that this planning was at an advanced stage. That was a really useful statement. If this contingency planning is indeed at an advanced stage, I would be keen to hear about the arrangements—about what is actually happening to ensure that we have radioisotopes for medical diagnosis and cancer treatment.

The UK is not self-sufficient when it comes to producing these materials. Around 80% of the materials we get come from Europe—from the Netherlands, Belgium and France—but, unlike medicines, they cannot be stockpiled. As soon as they are produced, they begin to decay, and the longer the delay, the smaller the dose of useful isotope that remains. There are two isotopes that are important in this process. The first is molybdenum, which has a half-life of 66 hours. Just to be clear, half-life means that after 66 hours it is half as effective as it was, and after another 66 hours it is half as effective again. This means that if we have a delay of even under a week, only a quarter of the useful substance will get to us. Once we get the molybdenum, we use it to generate technetium, which has an ever shorter half-life of only six hours. That has to get to patients quickly, but it would soon become utterly unusable. Not only does that have implications for patients’ health; it also has cost implications. If the original molybdenum does not get to us quickly, we will only have a half or a quarter of the stuff we thought we could use. That is problematic.

In 2008, a channel tunnel fire interrupted the supply of medical radioisotopes from the continent. Even this brief disturbance affected services. In 2015, industrial action in Calais resulted in radioisotopes being flown in via Coventry airport. The concern is that the situation that we face now is far greater than any of these incidents and much harder to mitigate, and the duration of the disruption is almost impossible to predict.

There are major questions over the UK’s ability to safeguard measures such as air freight deliveries of radioisotopes. Even assuming that aviation is completely unaffected by Brexit, there will be additional costs, and there is no guarantee that the supplies will be smooth, predictable and uninterrupted. There is uncertainty over the sourcing of radioisotopes from the European Union. We are currently part of Euratom, through which we are able to source them. Yes, of course, we can go further afield, but we cannot go to South Africa anymore because it has shut its reactor down, so supplies are even more limited. We could go to Canada, but as I have already explained, the time factor would make that problematic. This situation has serious implications.

Radioisotopes represent just one fragile and time-sensitive supply chain, but the challenges are considerable. With multiple links in the supply chain simultaneously threatened, the potential for serious disruption is immense, as we are seeing just now. The costs could be substantial, not least to the 1 million UK patients who depend on these services every single year. I am sure that the emergency planning has taken that into account. It is a pity that the Transport Secretary has gone because I would like to hear about the contingency planning for getting these medicines to the UK. In fact, since members of the Government are now able to switch roles, I would also like to hear how he is sourcing these medicines. I want to know what spending has taken place in Coventry.

Finally, I thank the Secretary of State for Transport for agreeing to appear here today. It is nice that he was here for a bit. I look forward to hearing more about the unhindered supply of medicines that we have heard about.
Mr Speaker: Sit down. The hon. Gentleman did not put in to speak. He is signalling that he wishes to speak, and that—\[Interuption.\] If he leaves me to make the judgment and tell him what the situation is, he will benefit from the instruction that I am about to give him. Working on the basis of an informal time limit, it would be helpful if colleagues did not exceed 12 minutes each. I call Mr Kevin Foster.

2.40 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Thank you for your guidance, Mr Speaker. I will of course observe that courtesy. I would not wish to prevent other Members from having the opportunity to contribute to this debate.

It is interesting to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), particularly given her interest in Coventry airport. As a former deputy leader of Coventry City Council, I know that one of the issues for that airport is that it is quite an underutilised resource since passenger flights from it were ended a couple of years back, when, sadly, the then Labour Government decided not to allow the airport permission for a terminal that would have allowed that service to become financially sustainable. Helpfully, there is quite a large resource there and an ability to develop it further. I hope that gives her some reassurances. Certainly, it is an airport that could contribute a lot more to our economy more generally. I will now focus my remarks more on Torbay.

There is a bit of a groundhog day feeling to this debate. Those who come here to tell us how dreadful no deal would be and to raise legitimate concerns about what that may mean for business and the economy, normally the next day pop back to complain about measures to mitigate no deal. There was always going to be a need to try to move with some urgency, particularly in relation to what the contract is actually about. We keep on talking about the ferries, but what we were actually talking about yesterday is the fact that this is about securing the supply of vital medicines into the UK if there is disruption at the border.

It is worth noting that there was not a contract just with Seaborne Freight; that is how it is regularly portrayed, for pretty obvious reasons. There are also contracts with DFDS and Brittany Ferries, which represent the majority of the capacity. Those contracts are still in place, even though the one with Seaborne Freight is not. As I said in my intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke), whose speech I found quite informative and useful, this is about the balance of the debate. Let us be candid: if the shadow Secretary of State, who is chuntering from a sedentary position, is saying that he would have taken the risk on the supply of medicines in a no-deal scenario, that is a position that he could defend. I do not think that would have been the right decision. My personal view is that it would be better to take a legal risk than a risk with vital life-saving medicines, but he can try to defend his view if he wishes to.

Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for her intervention, which gives me an opportunity to confirm that this is not about £33 million going straight into Eurotunnel shareholders’ pockets—it is about spending it on specified outcomes. I am perfectly content to see what the settlement is being used for.

Alan Brown: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Kevin Foster: I will continue with my speech for a few moments.

This is not about just handing over £33 million. It is about the fact that investment will follow with a company that—let us be blunt—the Government work very closely with on a range of issues. If there were disruption at the border, the Opposition would immediately be having a go and complaining about it, yet now they are complaining about measures to try to mitigate disruption in case of a no-deal outcome.

For me, this is about that balance. The Secretary of State would have had to look at the legal risk versus the risk of no medicines coming into the NHS. That is the nub of the decision. If every decision went perfectly, there would never be a debate in this Chamber about it. That is what this fundamentally boils down to. [Interuption.] If the shadow Secretary of State, who is

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has had his answers to his points. He may not like the answers he gets, but he has had them and I will not take a further intervention.

Some people have come here today talking about the fact that we should take no deal off the table and that would make all this absolutely pointless. I am afraid
that we cannot simply take no deal off the table. We have to do one of two things. To be fair, the Scottish National party and the Liberal Democrats take the consistent position that they would look to ignore the referendum result by revoking article 50. In effect, they would take no deal off the table by staying in the European Union. The only other option to take no deal off the table is to agree a deal with the European Union. That is where we see the inconsistency of many of Labour's positions. It is all very well Labour Members saying, “I don't like this deal; I don't want that deal,” but, unless they are prepared to say that they would revoke article 50—there are two parties that are still on that platform; I do not agree with that but it is at least a coherent position—then it is absolute nonsense to come here and say, “We don't like any of the deals but we demand that no deal be taken off the table.” That is absolute tosh and rubbish.

Peter Grant: Has the hon. Gentleman read the alternative deal that was put forward by the Scottish Government in December 2016?

Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I did read the White Paper put out by the Scottish National party a few years ago that was a bit of a work of fiction. My understanding, unless he wants to correct me, is that his position is that he wishes to remain in the European Union.

Peter Grant rose—

Kevin Foster: If the hon. Gentleman is going to get up and say that it is not, that will be quite a surprise for quite a number of Scottish National party supporters.

Peter Grant: I take it from his non-answer that the hon. Gentleman has not bothered to read that document. What the Scottish Government put forward over two years ago showed a willingness to make a significant compromise. They would have been willing to consider a deal that kept us in a single market and customs union if it allowed Scotland—and, indeed, Northern Ireland—to have the wishes of our people respected. It is a pity that he clearly has not bothered to read that document. Although his Government have completely ignored it, I would still recommend it to him because it might yet show us a way out of the shambles that they are creating.

Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. As I say, I naively thought that his position was to stay in the European Union, because that is what I keep hearing in virtually every debate on Brexit that the Scottish National party contributes to. I recall the SNP Government's proposals on staying and it makes the point: why on earth would anyone want to be outside the European Union while following all its laws, all its rules and all its customs obligations, and probably ending up still within its common fisheries policy, which, as we know, has had such an impact on the north-east of Scotland? It would continue to do so if we stayed in the European Union. We would be obliged to be part of it, despite the claims by the Scottish National party.

This debate is about having a go at no-deal preparations, while at the same time complaining that the impact of no deal would be too great. There is a real opportunity next week to put an end to all these discussions by voting for a deal. It is an opportunity for some Opposition Members to come off the fence and be clear about their options: the deal that has been negotiated, which is realistic and can be passed, or joining the SNP in voting to stay in the European Union. It is easy to make party political points. It is easy to have a go and criticise decisions that you know you probably would have taken.

That is the nub of this debate. Ultimately, it was a legal risk versus a risk to medicine supply. Many Members sitting in the Chamber know what they would have done in those circumstances. The contracts with DFDS and Brittany Ferries are still in place, providing the majority of this capacity. Next week, people will have to start choosing between the alternatives that are actually on the table, not ones that they pretend might be.

2.50 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Shortly after the Secretary of State awarded contracts to ferry operators as part of his no-deal contingency planning, the Transport Committee, which I chair, received two submissions to our inquiry into freight and Brexit alleging that the Secretary of State had acted illegally in doing so. Although it has already been published, I would like to make the House aware of the written evidence submitted by Dr Albert Sanchez-Graells. He is a reader in economic law at the University of Bristol Law School, a former member of the European Commission stakeholder expert group on public procurement, a member of the European Procurement Law Group and a member of the Procurement Lawyers Association Brexit working group, so one would think that he probably knows what he is talking about.

Dr Sanchez-Graells was clear in his evidence to our Committee that

“The award of three contracts for ‘additional shipping freight capacity’ in the context of the Government’s ‘No-Deal’ preparations raises important illegality concerns.”

He said that, under regulation 32(2) of the Public Contracts Regulations 2015,

“‘extreme urgency’ only exists where an unforeseeable event renders impossible the observance of the time-limits laid down for calls for tenders.”

He said that the award of the three contracts for additional capacity seems “likely” to be in breach of that regulation,

“as there was time to comply with the 60 calendar days’ time limit required by alternative, transparent competitive procedures with negotiation.”

He went on to say:

“Even if it was accepted that there was no time for alternative competitive procedures… the award to Seaborne Freight (UK) Ltd still raises issues of potential illegality. The Secretary of State for Transport has justified the award as an act of support for a new British start-up business. This fact, coupled with… the lack of readiness of the port infrastructure… undercuts the rationale of the extreme urgency of the procurement and heightens the likely illegality of the award.”
We now know that the Department faced a legal challenge from Eurotunnel and that settling the case has cost UK taxpayers at least £33 million.

I am afraid that the Secretary of State has shown a repeated failure to operate in an open and transparent manner. He avoided questions in the House yesterday, but as I said, that does not mean that these questions go away. I understand why he is not in his place. However, I expect to receive written answers to these questions, as I assume that the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), who is sitting on the Front Bench, does not intend to respond to them this afternoon.

These are the questions that I want to raise. It is reported in The Times today that the Secretary of State wanted to fight Eurotunnel’s legal action over the award of contracts to ferry firms but was overruled. Is that true? What legal advice did the Government receive on the likely success of Eurotunnel’s action? How was the sum of £33 million arrived at? Is the fact that the Secretary of State was overruled an indication that he does not enjoy the confidence of the Prime Minister or his Cabinet colleagues? I believe he mentioned that it was decided by a Cabinet working group.

When the Secretary of State was not here yesterday, we had the rather ludicrous spectacle of the Secretary of State for Health trying to cover for him and explain. He avoided questions in the House yesterday, and cost to the taxpayer?

“The purpose of the decision is to ensure that unhindered flow of medicines.”—[Official Report, 4 March 2019, Vol. 655, c. 700.]

However, he failed to answer the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) about how much of the £33 million being paid to Eurotunnel is being contributed by the Department of Health and Social Care. We still need an answer to that question, and I expect to receive one.

I will not be surprised if my Committee has additional questions. The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), who unfortunately is not able to be here for this debate, has described the level of this settlement as “absolutely outrageous”, so I am sure he will share my wish to understand how it was arrived at. How much of Eurotunnel’s £33 million settlement will be spent on border measures in Calais, rather than in the UK? Is it right that the UK taxpayer will be paying for these measures, rather than Eurotunnel or the French Government?

Andy McDonald: Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the settlement may amount to an entirely fresh procurement process, and if that has not been done correctly, there is a real risk of yet further litigation and cost to the taxpayer?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We would like to receive further information about the basis on which this settlement was reached and the legal risks that it entails.

Finally, I return to the question I asked yesterday, to which I received nothing but bluster. If there is a Brexit deal, or if indeed there were no Brexit, how much of the taxpayers’ £33 million do the Government expect to recover from Eurotunnel? I take it from the Secretary of State’s earlier response that the answer is none. I would be grateful if we received answers from him to those questions.

It is essential that the Department for Transport is subject to proper scrutiny and held properly accountable for its waste of public money. It is very disappointing that the Secretary of State once again had to be dragged to the Chamber. At least on that occasion he was here, but we still do not have proper answers on these important matters, which the public deserve.

2.57 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I am grateful to be able to speak in this debate. I want to start by dealing with the red herring we frequently hear from Conservative Members that this debate is about impugning the Government’s responsibility to prepare for a no-deal Brexit. It is not about that. It is about their ability to make those preparations competently and without squandering taxpayers’ money.

Of course, the Government have to prepare for no deal because they are insistent on keeping no deal on the table, and last week they voted against the SNP amendment that would have taken it off the table. As some Conservative Members have generously accepted, no deal could be taken off the table by a number of routes, including an extension of article 50 or the option of revoking it—the lifeline thrown to the British Government by a number of Scottish politicians, including myself. In that respect, I declare an interest, with the backing of the Good Law Project.

Let us get that red herring off the table. This is not about the Opposition querying whether the Government should prepare for a no-deal or Brexit. This is about the Opposition doing their job and holding the Government to account for making those preparations in a shambolic, chaotic fashion that is wasteful of public money.

Last week, the Government settled out of court litigation brought against them by Eurotunnel for the legal reasons laid out by the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood). They paid more than £33 million to buy off the risk of losing the action and having to pay more, and the action was brought because they had failed to put three contracts—not just Seaborne Freight, so far as I am aware, but all three contracts—out to competitive tender. That £33 million was in lieu of a larger sum that would have had to be paid out in damages if the court case had gone ahead and the Government had lost.

That is why I, as a lawyer, am so puzzled by the insistence of the Secretary of State for Transport and the Secretary of State for Health that this £33 million will somehow pay for increased security at the ports. In my long experience of 30 years—20-odd years at the Bar and a number of years as a solicitor—I have never heard of such a stipulation in an out-of-court settlement in this type of case. That is why I was so puzzled, and perhaps expressed my puzzlement in terms that were unparliamentary.

I want to know. The Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), is looking at his phone and is not interested in what SNP Members have to say, as usual, but this is not going to go away because I am going to pursue it with Eurotunnel and others. I want to
know—[Interruption.] Well, perhaps he could just listen and be quiet while he is listening. I want to know whether Eurotunnel—

Sir Peter Bottomley ( Worthing West) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it customary for the Member who is speaking to provoke a Minister into looking at her directly and then to say that he is somehow interrupting her. It seems to me it would be far better if the hon. and learned Lady went on addressing the Chair and left the Minister to listen, like the rest of us.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has his own interpretation of the chronology of events, which those attending to observe our proceedings can make a judgment about for themselves, and that is one point of view. If I may say so, there is another point of view, which is that the hon. and learned Lady was somewhat disquieted, not to say mildly irritated, by the junior Minister’s evident fascination with the contents of his electronic device. It might be thought courteous not to be focusing intently on the said contents when a Member is addressing the House. I hope the hon. Gentleman will not take offence when I say that he is in the end a very loyal sort of person, and it is not terribly surprising that he should spring to the defence of his ministerial colleague and fellow parliamentarian. It was very gracious of him and a nice try.

Joanna Cherry: It may have been a nice try, but I am not going to leave this one alone. I want to know how much of that £33 million will be repaid in the event of there being a deal. I think I know the answer: it will be nil. I want to know whether there was any legal agreement that any amount of that £33 million was to be spent on improved security, and if so, to what extent. I will not be leaving those issues alone either today or in the future.

I was the first person, to my knowledge, to raise this issue on the Floor of the House or in Committee earlier this year. When I got hold of a copy of the contract with Seaborne Freight, which was readily available on the internet, I, like any lawyer worth their salt, looked up the public contracts regulations and realised that it looked very much as though the Government had avoided the competitive tendering process that they are bound to carry out under law.

That is why I raised this issue with the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union in the Chamber on 7 January. I am going to go through the chronology because I want to make the point that I have raised at least half a dozen times the question of what was the urgent or unforeseeable event that justified that not being a competitive tender, and that on no occasion have I received the answer that has been given today by the Secretary of State for Transport that it was to do with a decision taken collectively by the Government last autumn to improve the supply of medicines in the event of a no-deal Brexit. The very first time I heard such an explanation was on the television at the weekend, when the Secretary of State for Health used it, and he of course used it again yesterday. However, it is very odd—again, this informs my puzzlement and frustration earlier this afternoon—that we have never heard that explanation before.

Let me go through the chronology. On 7 January in this Chamber, I asked the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union why the contract with Seaborne Freight had proceeded under the negotiated procurement procedure without prior publication—that is to say, not competitively—because it seems to me that it must have been foreseeable for quite a long time that there might be a no-deal situation and it was therefore hard to say that no deal had come out of the blue and was urgent or unforeseeable. I received the usual non-answer from the Secretary of State. I will not bore hon. Members with the contents of the answer—they can look it up in Hansard—but there is nothing about a requirement to prepare for the urgent supply of medicine and, indeed, no kind of explanation at all.

The following day, 8 January, I raised the same point with the Secretary of State for Transport on the Floor of the House. I said I was concerned about the legality of the procurement process, that I had a copy of the contract notice and that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) reminded the House earlier that day, no deal has always been a possibility because the Prime Minister said right at the beginning that no deal is better than a bad deal. I asked the Secretary of State what the urgency was and whether the Government had set aside any funds in the event of legal action. I got a non-answer, other than to say it was a “matter of extreme urgency”, and there was no reference to the supply of medicine.

The following day, 9 January, I raised the matter in some detail with the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), at a question and answer session before the Exiting the European Union Committee. I am proud to say that the segment where I questioned him went viral on the internet. I asked him a number of times to tell the Committee what the urgent and unforeseeable event was that justified these contracts not going out to competitive tender, and he was unable to tell me.

If the explanation that it had been a collective decision by the UK Government to put these contracts out non-competitively to secure the supply of medicines, I would have expected the Minister in charge of no-deal planning at the Department for Exiting the European Union to know that. The fact that he did not know and, under sustained questioning, did not mention it does raise a suspicion in my mind that it is an explanation that has been invented after the fact, rather than an explanation that has always been the case.

Charlie Elphicke: Will the hon. and learned Lady give way?

Joanna Cherry: I will finish the chronology, and then I will give way.

That was on 9 January. Later, I put in a written question:

“To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, what unforeseeable events led his Department to award contracts for additional shipping freight capacity under Regulation 32 of The Public Contracts Regulations 2015.”

I received the reply:

“A negotiated procurement procedure without prior publication was concluded…to ensure that capacity can be in place in time for a No Deal exit whilst at the same time securing value for money for the taxpayer.”
There was no mention of the need to secure the urgent supply of medicines in the event of no deal, but there was a mention of value for money for taxpayers. Do the Government still think they have provided value for money for taxpayers, given what we have heard this afternoon? I very much doubt it.

On 31 January, I asked the Attorney General about this matter. I asked him whether he was concerned that the Government could face legal action in respect of their failure to put these contracts out to competitive tender, whether he had been asked to advise on the matter and whether any money had been put aside for the contingency of such court action. He fell back on the Law Officers’ convention not to answer that question, but he certainly did not mention that the reason why these contracts had been awarded as a matter of urgency and non-competitively was the need to secure the supply of medicines.

On 11 February, I raised this matter with the Secretary of State for Transport. I asked:

“Will he state clearly for the record, as I have asked this question of him and other Ministers five times now: what were the reasons of extreme urgency and the unforeseeable events that justified his Department proceeding without competitive tendering?”

He said it was

“a change to the assumptions on the levels and length of disruption that might arise in a no-deal Brexit scenario.”—[Official Report, 11 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 624.]

Perhaps the junior Minister could take a note that I want to know from the Secretary of State for Transport why he said on 11 February that the explanation was a change to the assumptions on the levels and length of disruption that might arise, and why he is now saying that it was a decision back in the autumn to secure the supply of medicines in the event of no deal.

Charlie Elphicke: Will the hon. and learned Lady give way?

Joanna Cherry: I will finish the chronology, and then I will give way.

Finally, I raised the point again on 14 February with the Secretary of State for Transport, asking him what he meant by a “change in the assumptions”. I asked:

“Would he care to elaborate on exactly what he meant by that? Does he think that that defence will stand up in court?”

Those were my exact words. He said:

“I recall explaining on Monday precisely what the circumstances were, and I do not want to detain the House any longer by repeating an answer that I gave to the hon. and learned Lady three days ago.”—[Official Report, 14 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 1038.]

Again, he had an opportunity to say that the explanation was a requirement to secure the urgent supply of medicines in the event of a no-deal Brexit, but he did not. In fact, he told me that he had already told me precisely what the circumstances were, three days before, when he referred to a change in assumptions and said nothing about medicine.

I am going to give way to the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) in a moment, but the point I am making is that this is just an example of the number of times that I have pursued this question. I know that other hon. Members have done so, too, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Kilmarnock and Loudoun and for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan). They have pursued in some detail their concerns about the supply of medicines after a no-deal Brexit, and never has anyone said to them, “Don’t worry, we so are concerned about this that we have risked breaking the law on competitive tendering to sort it all out.” That is why I am highly sceptical.

Charlie Elphicke: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for giving way, and I have been listening carefully to her submissions. The question of purpose is dealt with in the National Audit Office report, which states that the decision was meant

“to prioritise the flow of critical goods into the UK”.

Specifically, the report says that in September and October 2018, the intention was to

“ensure that capacity and flexibility exists for government to prioritise the flow of certain... goods”.

In November 2018, the Department’s business case was

“to ensure that capacity and flexibility exist for government to enable the prioritisation of... certain goods”.

It seems to me that critical goods were always in the mind of the Department, so I am not sure that her submissions to the House are borne out.

Joanna Cherry: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that, because he actually reinforces the point that I sought to make. The National Audit Office has that information, and the House of Commons has had it today and yesterday, but my point is that on repeated occasions when I asked a number of Ministers from different Departments what the explanation was for this urgent need to tender non-competitively, not once did any of them mention what we are told was a collective decision to do it for a particular purpose. I therefore question whether that explanation has been invented after the fact.

Andy McDonald: The hon. and learned Lady is doing a brilliant job of exposing the facade that has been put up to excuse this reprehensible behaviour, but is the bottom line not that the Government knew that they were in breach of their own procurement rules and that Eurotunnel was going to win? That is why they settled the case.

Joanna Cherry: That is the bottom line. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right.

I am going to draw to a conclusion, because I know that others want to speak. The history of this whole event, which the Government now say that they all knew about as it was a collective decision, has been one of evasion and obfuscation. I and others are left with the inevitable conclusion that they are trying to cover up a monumental error of staggering negligence in their preparations for a no-deal Brexit, which is costing the British taxpayer a lot of money. I would like to point out that Scottish taxpayers did not even vote for all this nonsense in the first place, and their representatives in this House have, apart from the Scottish Tories, done their best to try to get a no-deal Brexit off the table.

I came to the House this afternoon planning to ask for the resignation of the Secretary of State for Transport. That has been asked for by others already. But now that we know that this was a collective decision and that the
Government are taking collective responsibility for it, let me say that in any normal, healthy and functioning democracy this scandal would bring the Government down.

3.13 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): What a farcical situation. It gives me no pleasure to say that this Government have become a laughing stock to people not only in this country but throughout Europe and the world. In many ways, that is epitomised by one individual: the Secretary of State for Transport.

It came as no great surprise that Eurotunnel was aggrieved by the decision taken by the Secretary of State for Transport and his colleagues. I am no expert on procurement policy or tendering law, but it strikes me as common sense that there should have been a tendering process, especially as it was very obvious that the Government were making a decision late in the day in response to a predicament of their own making. If they were serious about considering a no-deal Brexit, they should have begun the preparations as soon as this House triggered article 50. They decided not to, and to delay it, so they found themselves in a predicament and decided not just to avoid the law but to consciously, perhaps, break it as well.

When the Secretary of State for Transport announced that the procurement process was not being followed, he announced to the House that three contracts were being issued—for three “compliant bids”, as he said. Towards the tail end of that ministerial statement, I asked a question that I thought was pretty innocuous, and I expected a certain reply. I asked:

“In the interests of transparency, will the Secretary of State indicate to the House which companies were considered for the contracts?”

At that point, I realised that the procurement process had not been followed, but I assumed that the Secretary of State had at least had a shortlist and decided from that which companies were best equipped to fulfil the requirements. The response was significant, because the question was totally ignored. The Secretary of State simply said:

“We received three compliant bids, all of which we judged acceptable and accepted.”—[Official Report, 8 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 202.]

In other words, there was not just an avoidance of the procurement process or a dilution of it; there was a complete and utter conscious avoidance of it. Instead, we had cherry-picking—of the worst kind—of the three companies.

We have learned now that the Government have paid £33 million to Eurotunnel to avoid the case going to court, because it is pretty clear that the Government did not have a leg to stand on. The question that has already been asked is where that is coming from. Are there contingencies available that we do not know about? Will there be further public expenditure cuts? Where precisely will this £33 million of unplanned expenditure come from?

It is important to recognise that Eurotunnel had plenty of time to prepare if it had been given the opportunity to make a bid. There was clearly no urgency when the Government chose to take the action they did. It is also important to recognise that although the Government have said that they are coming to an agreement with Eurotunnel and will pay that £33 million, they have unusually stipulated what the money will be used for, as has been mentioned. We understand that the money is for the development of infrastructure, security and border measures that will guarantee the flow of vehicles carrying urgent and vital goods to help keep supply chains moving that are essential to both industry and consumers. It is interesting that the Government have stipulated that, and it begs the question that has already been raised by the shadow Secretary of State: what is the legal basis for taking such action and making such a stipulation?

Andrew Dean, an expert in procurement law who works at the law firm Clifford Chance, used to advise the DFT and is widely recognised as an expert in his field, said:

“If Eurotunnel were required to develop or redevelop infrastructure that delivers or supports a public function as part of this settlement, there is a risk it could be construed as another piece of public procurement without open and transparent competition... In which case the government would be back to square one, with other potential providers able to challenge the process.”

My question to the Minister is this: has the Department considered that possibility? What advice is he currently receiving from his departmental legal team on where the Government now stand? There is a distinct possibility that they are going from the frying pan into the fire. They have apparently solved one problem of their own making, but they have another problem, also of their own making, that they will possibly have to confront in the very near future. That is an important issue.

All of us are extremely concerned about the situation in which we find ourselves. At one point I thought the Government were surely not serious about considering the possibility of a no-deal Brexit. I suspect that initially they were not serious about pursuing it, but as time has gone on and the negotiations have been more and more unfruitful they have found themselves inevitably in the situation of having to make quite extreme, ill-thought-out contingency plans. I hope very much indeed that the Government do not have to introduce those plans. The message has gone out from right across this House, as well as from industry, the trade union movement and civil society generally: for goodness’ sake, even at this late stage, end this farce once and for all, and take no deal off the table.

3.21 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) on securing the debate, and you, Mr Speaker, on granting it.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), who is no longer in her place, earlier speculated on why it was the Secretary of State for Health who responded yesterday. I am sure Members are aware that requests have gone out to civil servants in all Departments—for example, the Department for Education—saying, “Please, please, please, will you come and work for one of the Brexit Departments?” It may be that the Secretary of State for Health was simply responding to such a request from the Department for Transport to go and bolster the numbers in that Department.
Mr Speaker, you rightly pre-empted the introductory comments a number of Members wanted to make in relation to the Secretary of State’s rather cluttered hall of shame. Had you enabled us to dwell a little bit on the other matters for which the Secretary of State has been responsible, or indeed irresponsible, this debate would have continued for much longer. I will just say, “Probation, timetable fiasco, drones” and move on to the subject of Seaborne. Before I do, it is worth pointing out on the timetable fiasco that in correspondence with me the Secretary of State refused even to reveal that the Department for Transport had any responsibility for that. That is rather indicative of the way he approaches things, as is his unwillingness to issue an apology for anything he has been responsible for. I think he actually sneaked in a very small apology earlier today, I think for the first time, although it was collective responsibility that he seemed to be admitting to. Maybe that is a positive development.

I have a chronology. It is not as detailed, erudite or in-depth as anything from the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), but I thought I would go through recent statements by the Secretary of State to see where he has referred before his recent—just to see his level of awareness of the prospect of no deal. I started googling, as everyone does these days, and the first reference was from last month. Nothing surprising there. Apparently, because of the Secretary of State’s completely disrespectful manner and what he has been saying about a no-deal Brexit, he has been banned from the port of Calais. That augurs well. I understand he may have had to leave the Chamber because there is currently a go-slow at Calais. It does not augur well for our future relationship if Calais has sought to ban our Secretary of State for Transport because of his attitude to no deal.

Going back a bit further to September 2018, Mr Barnier was apparently ticking off one of our departed Secretaries of State for Exiting the European Union, the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), over his no-deal letters. In September 2018, therefore, there was clearly an awareness of no deal. In August 2018, hauliers were warning our Secretary of State for Transport that he had no plans for no deal, so clearly in August he was being warned that he had no plans. Going back a little bit further to February 2018, some Members will remember that the Secretary of State for Transport was saying that in a no-deal situation we would be growing our own—farmers in the UK would be doing the growing, but presumably some of us would be too—potatoes and other vegetables in our own back gardens. He had also made the same comment in October 2017.

At that point, I gave up. It was clear that however much more trawling I did, I would find earlier references the Secretary of State had made to the risk of no deal. Clearly, for him to say now, or to have said a couple of months ago, that no deal was an emergency about which there was no knowledge within the Government, is not borne out by the facts that are very easily there and available for people to dip into if they choose to do so.

More recently, the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West has been particularly insistent on pursuing him over the contracts, as have other Members of the SNP and Members of other parties. I wrote to the Secretary of State in January. My final question was: “Are the contracts in accordance with procurement rules?” I made lots of other points in the letter, most of which were answered, but that final point was not answered. I do not know why. A lot of other things were said in the reply to my letter, including that it was because of me personally and my Liberal Democrat colleagues that we were going to have no deal, rather than the 118 Conservative Members who voted against the Prime Minister’s deal. Apparently, it was all my fault. However, the point about whether the contracts were in accordance with procurement rules was completely ignored in the response I received. The response was not from the Secretary of State, of course; it was from the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani).

I would like to conclude, as I know other Members wish to speak. We have had to bring the Secretary of State, or his representative on Earth in the shape of the Secretary of State for Health, before us a number of times and it is hard to find new material to go over, so I will just finish by saying that in any other Government at any other time the Secretary of State would be sacked by the Prime Minister. In any other Government at any other time, the Secretary of State would in fact have resigned before he was sacked, but this is not any other Government at any other time. Our calamitous Secretary of State remains in post mainly, I suspect, because he was in charge of the Prime Minister’s leadership campaign when she became our Prime Minister.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. There are two remaining speakers. Just as a helpful guide to both hon. Members, the average length of Back-Bench speeches has been approximately 10 minutes. Neither hon. Member need feel a driving ambition to exceed that very satisfactory self-imposed time constraint.

3.28 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful for the chance to speak in this debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) on securing it, and I thank you for approving it, Mr Speaker.

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) could have conducted this debate on her own, because in the space of what I am reliably informed was about 10 minutes, she utterly dismantled any shred of credibility that the Secretary of State and the Government had left. She has made a succession of attempts to get a simple answer—I can vouch for that, because I was often either behind or beside her when she did so—but one has not been forthcoming. The charitable explanation of that is, as she suggested, that the Government made up the answer just a few days earlier. The less charitable, but, I fear, correct, answer is that they responded to every single question with a deliberate attempt to place obstacles in the way of Members of Parliament and prevent them from doing their job. This Parliament is supposed to be getting back sovereignty as a result of Brexit, but the Government’s first, and often only, response to proper parliamentary inquiry is to stonewall, swat away questions and often to insult the motivations of those asking the questions.

It was a bit rich for the Secretary of State to talk about how many times he has answered these questions. He has not answered them at all. He has responded to
them, but has not yet given an answer. Although my right hon. Friend could not, within the terms of parliamentary order, say that he has not been telling the truth, it is fair to say that he has not been telling the whole truth. Although not telling the whole truth is not unparliamentary, it can sometimes have the same effect as telling a complete untruth. Although the explanation that the contract is about securing emergency medical supplies has apparently been talked about in Government circles since August or September last year, it has been used as an explanation for Members of Parliament only for the past few days. It simply does not wash.

**Tom Brake:** I agree that the explanation about medicines is entirely dubious. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, even if it were true, the fact that our Government—in peacetime, not wartime—are having to prepare to air freight in medicines because of the risk that they will get stuck at the border is condemnation enough of their complete incompetence?

**Peter Grant:** Absolutely. The single biggest example of incompetence coupled with complacency—it must be said that a lot of the official Opposition were guilty of this—was triggering article 50 and setting a two-year deadline that we cannot unilaterally get out of, after which we will leave without a deal, before the Government had any idea what no deal meant. It is notable that, although the Prime Minister’s mantra was, “No deal is better than a bad deal,” we just heard the Secretary of State announce that, two years after the referendum, they suddenly discovered that no deal would be a lot more disruptive than they realised. I will just mention in passing that when the Government discovered that a no-deal Brexit would be much worse than they realised, they were allowed to change their minds, have another think about it and do something that they had not done before, but 60 million citizens of these nations have not been allowed to have another think and perhaps another go at a decision now that they have been told what they could not have been expected to know in June 2016 about the disastrous consequences of no deal, because Her Majesty’s Government were blithely unaware of it until August or September last year.

We are told that the reason why the Government brought in this new company was the desire to support a new start-up business. Well, bravo. I would always support that, but it completely annihilates the claim that the reason for urgency was that this was a potential life-or-death medical supplies requirement. If there is a service that cannot be allowed to fail because people’s lives would be at risk, who in their right mind would give the opportunity to undertake that work to somebody who had never done the job before? I am sure that health services and health authorities all over the United Kingdom do what they can to give work experience and job opportunities to young people who have not had too great a time at school, but they would not under any circumstances put them behind the wheel of an ambulance with a blue light and ask them to go and save lives, but that is, in effect, what the Secretary of State is telling us the Government did with this contract. Either the contract was innocuous enough that we could afford to give it to a business that did not exist, because nothing would go wrong if the whole thing collapsed, or it was a life-or-death contract that, for reasons of urgency, had to be signed very quickly. If that was the case, it was an act of utter folly to award it to anyone who did not already have an impeccable record in the running of ferry services.

I commend the efforts of the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) and the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) to protect the Secretary of State by saying, “It wasn’t the Secretary of State who was incompetent; it was everybody else in the Government.” My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West has given us the way out of that.

What does the fact that this Parliament does not have the authority to table a vote of no confidence in the Secretary of State for Transport tell us about this model of parliamentary democracy? We do not have the authority to instruct a Prime Minister to remove a Minister from office, and we do not have a say over who the Prime Minister appoints or does not appoint to any post in the Government. We must be one of the very few allegedly democratic Parliaments in Europe that does not get a say before Ministers are appointed. Ministers in the Scottish Government have the same Crown appointment as Ministers in the UK Government, but the First Minister of Scotland will not put them forward until they have been agreed by a motion of the Scottish Parliament. The First Minister herself did not accept the commission from Her Majesty until her appointment had been recommended and agreed by a vote of the Scottish Parliament. Maybe that is one of the 1,001 improvements to democracy we need in this place, so that in future Ministers are appointed and unappointed not at the whim of the Prime Minister but by a vote of their peers in this Parliament and can removed from office when this Parliament loses confidence in them, rather than only when the Prime Minister decides they have become too much of an embarrassment.

Throughout this Brexit shambles, any number of serious issues have been raised—life-or-death issues, issues with the potential to devastate our economy, issues such as citizens’ rights that have the potential to ruin the lives of millions of our fellow citizens, issues with the potential to wipe out entire sectors of industry and put tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands, of people on the dole—and each and every time the knife-jerk, first-choice response from Her Majesty’s Government has been to throw it back at the person raising the concern. If it comes from Labour Members, they are told, “Well, if you lot had been in power, it would have been an even worse disaster.” What kind of a way is that to run a Government? I can understand why a lot of people would have concerns if the current Leader of the Opposition became Prime Minister—I would have my concerns as well—but if the only thing the Government can say to defend themselves is that the Government-in-waiting would be even worse, they are a Government well past their sell-by date.

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West has repeatedly and rightly raised valid concerns—I hope she will continue to raise them because she has right on her side—and the response from numerous Ministers has been ridicule: she did not know what she was talking about, she was trying to make trouble, she was just an SNP Member, the SNP did not want to leave the EU anyway so how could they possibly have any good ideas for making Brexit less damaging? That
would be unacceptable for a Government with a majority of 150. For a Government who threw away their majority and do not command majority support in the House or the wider public, this is despicable and nothing short of negligence. If that is the best they can do, not only the Secretary of State but the whole Government have to go.

3.37 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to follow—well, everybody.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), and you, Mr Speaker, on granting this debate. It is important when such issues occur that the Government and their Ministers and Secretaries of State actually be held to account and not be allowed to duck and dive their way out of their responsibilities.

The Secretary of State is increasingly popular with some people—those employed by law firms—but he is not popular with anyone else. Let’s recap. He contracted a company with no ships or terms and conditions of their own and after no proper assessment. He has given no answers. There has been no accountability. He takes no responsibility. He basically does not have a clue, and the public have been left with a bill of at least £33 million, not counting the £800,000 in consultant fees and whatever else. Coming from a constituency ravaged by the effects of universal credit over the past six years, I find that deeply insulting to all the people suffering under the policies of this Government.

We have heard from other right hon. and hon. Members about the litany of failure that the Secretary of State has visited upon his ministerial career; it is well rehearsed and I will not go into it again. Nobody has confidence in this Secretary of State, and yesterday we found out, because he was too feart to appear, that even he does not have confidence in himself as Secretary of State. What he does have is a brass neck wider than a ship’s bell. What a snapshot of this Tory Brexit chaos and this Tory Government: defending the indefensible time after time, and I will not go into it again. Nobody has confidence in the Transport Secretary—that may have gone up while I was speaking.

The Secretary of State’s decision to award Seaborne Freight a contract worth £13.8 million attracted widespread criticism when it was announced. Seaborne was founded only two years ago and, as I said, had no ships or trading history. That has been raised by many of us in the Chamber since the beginning of the year, which was the first opportunity we had. Although the company had never run a channel service, it was one of three firms awarded contracts totalling £1108 million to lay on additional crossings. As we have heard, the Department for Transport spent £800,000 on consultancy services when evaluating Seaborne and was warned of significant risks that came with the tender. Despite that, Seaborne was awarded the contract.

As my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) has pointed out time and again, concerns were also raised that the EU procurement rules had not been followed in the awarding of the contract. That has been brought home by the Eurotunnel action, which has been settled out of court. Eurotunnel had said that it would take legal action, and it did. The Department argued that because this was an emergency there was legal justification, but there was doubt about that, because the emergency scenario of a no-deal Brexit had been raised well in advance. This was a disastrous decision. The cost to the taxpayer of the Transport Secretary’s incompetence is now well beyond any joke.

Alan Brown: My hon. Friend is making a fine point. Does he share my surprise that when the Government have effectively been shown to have broken a law of competitive tendering, the Transport Secretary’s defence is, “I am really disappointed that Eurotunnel took me to court.”? He breaks a law, and then blames the company that was wronged in the first place.

Drew Hendry: My hon. Friend, who, along with other colleagues here, has been at this since the beginning, has made the point that the Transport Secretary takes no responsibility. He is willing to accept none of the criticism. I would say that he is Teflon, but the public know that he is not, because all this sticks to him. However, he has not had his just deserts: either being sacked from his job, which should have happened, or resigning from it.

Andy McDonald: The point about the Transport Secretary’s intervention in his other lives is well illustrated by his attitude to judicial review. He did not like people taking the Government to court, so he made it more difficult for them to do so. Is that not consistent with his attitude to this matter?

Drew Hendry: I agree with the shadow Transport Secretary. It is indicative of the way in which the Transport Secretary has performed throughout his ministerial career, and, indeed, it is now indicative of the Government themselves.

The Government’s settlement with Eurotunnel confirms what everyone except, it seems, the Transport Secretary knew: that flouting EU law on the basis of so-called unforeseen events was a completely untenable position. The only development that was foreseeable was that he would make a hash of anything that he touched. He now even has his own website, tracking how much money he is costing the taxpayer. That becomes a great deal more humorous when we see the amount: £2.7 billion as of this morning, although—as we know from the Transport Secretary—that may have gone up while I have been speaking.

Before the Government’s settlement last week, Eurotunnel said:

“It appears … that the secretary of state is seeking to maintain extensive claims to confidentiality in relation to large numbers of disclosed documents and appears to intend that large parts, if not all, of the trial should be held in private.”

Moreover, we have again seen a failure to disclose answers to the questions asked in the Chamber.

Let me end by asking some more questions. The Transport Secretary says that there has been a changed assumption. No, there has not; there has been complacency and arrogance. There was an urgent question about this issue yesterday, following a weekend of silence from the Transport Secretary. Why did he duck it, and send the Health Secretary to answer it in his place? Has he any shred of respect for the principle of ministerial accountability?
The question remains why Eurotunnel was overlooked in this first place. As I have said, the secrecy is of real concern. How much documentation is still hidden from public view? If the no-deal contract is not invoked, how much money will still be paid to Eurotunnel? With engineering firm Bechtel set to sue the Government over the HS2 tender process, what other departmental procedural risks still exist? Is it not the case that any other individual working on a business deal would have been sacked by now for wasting the amount of money the Secretary of State has wasted to date? What message does that send to the public? The message it sends is that failure, waste, ignorance, complacency, arrogance and contempt for the public are to be rewarded by the Tories.

3.45 pm

Alan Brown: Once again, I thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this debate. I also thank all Members who have taken part, particularly the two Conservative Members, whose contributions in trying to defend the Transport Secretary unwittingly made our case for us in terms of how big a farce this has really been. There was a ludicrous defence of the Transport Secretary by the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke), who stated the whole Government were to blame for being too late in undertaking contingency planning. With the Transport Secretary also advising us suddenly of a collective Cabinet decision, we now know we have collective Cabinet incompetence, which says all we need to know about this Government and the leadership of the Prime Minister.

Despite having had nearly three hours of debate, the reality is that we still have no clarity about what the £33 million to Eurotunnel gets us and what, if anything, is being withheld by the Government in event of a withdrawal agreement being reached. We have had no reasons for the court climbdown on Eurotunnel’s challenge; nobody has been able to answer the questions on isotopes from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan); and we have had no justification for how this whole procurement exercise is suddenly a medicine-led exercise. We have had no clarity on the rationale for pursuing an exemption in competitive tendering on the basis of the regulation 32 exemption for unforeseeable circumstances, and no answers to the detailed questions from my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry).

Many Members have called for the Transport Secretary’s head, although, as I said earlier, it goes much wider than this. There was a classic oxymoron from the Transport Secretary: in defending his approach to the contingency planning he said that sometimes risks have to be taken. It undermines the point of contingency planning if he is actually willing to take risks. I will finish with this: the longer he stays in post is a risk too far for the United Kingdom. Again, I thank Members from across the House for their contributions.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the latest developments in the UK Government ferry contract awards for no-deal preparations.

Chris Grayling: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would just like to inform the House that the annex containing the requirements for Eurotunnel to spend money on improvements at the borders has now been published on the Government website.

Mr Speaker: That is an extremely helpful point of order from the right hon. Gentleman, and I thank him. It is by way of being a public information notice and I take it very much in that spirit.
Speaker’s Statement

3.48 pm

Mr Speaker: I have a brief announcement to make. I have received a letter this afternoon from the Registrar of Criminal Appeals informing me that Fiona Onasanya’s application for leave to appeal against her conviction has been refused. This notification triggers the provisions of the Recall of MPs Act 2015, and I will accordingly be writing to the relevant petition officer to inform that person that Fiona Onasanya is therefore subject to a recall petition process. It will be for that officer to make the arrangements for the petition. I am sure the House will understand that I will not take points of order on what I have just said, which I think is clear, and I thank the House for its courtesy in listening to that announcement.

NORTHERN IRELAND BUDGET (ANTICIPATION AND ADJUSTMENTS) (NO. 2) BILL (BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE)

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the Northern Ireland Budget (Anticipation and Adjustments) (No. 2) Bill:

Timetable

(1) (a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be taken at today’s sitting in accordance with this Order.

(b) Notices of Amendments, new Clauses or new Schedules to be moved in Committee of the whole House may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before the Bill has been read a second time.

(c) Proceedings on Second Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) four hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(d) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) six hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put

(2) When the Bill has been read a second time:

(a) it shall, despite Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put;

(b) the Speaker shall leave the Chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

(3) (a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chairman shall report the Bill to the House without putting any Question.

(b) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

(4) If, following proceedings in Committee of the whole House and any proceedings on Consideration of the Bill, a legislative grand committee withholds consent to the Bill or any Clause or Schedule of the Bill or any amendment made to the Bill, the House shall proceed to Reconsideration of the Bill without any Question being put.

(5) If, following Reconsideration of the Bill:

(a) a legislative grand committee withholds consent to any Clause or Schedule of the Bill or any amendment made to the Bill (but does not withhold consent to the whole Bill and, accordingly, the Bill is amended in accordance with Standing Order No. 83N(6)), and

(b) a Minister of the Crown indicates his or her intention to move a minor or technical amendment to the Bill, the House shall proceed to consequential Consideration of the Bill without any Question being put.

(6) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (1), the Chairman or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply:

(a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;

(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;

(c) the Question on any amendment, new Clause or new Schedule selected by the Chair or Speaker for separate decision;

(d) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(e) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded; and shall not put any other questions, other than the question on any motion described in paragraph (17)(a) of this Order.

(7) On a Motion so made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Chairman or Speaker shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

(8) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (6)(d) on successive amendments moved or Motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Chairman or Speaker shall instead put a single Question in relation to those amendments or Motions.

(9) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (6)(e) in relation to successive provisions of the Bill, the Chairman shall instead put a single Question in relation to those provisions, except that the Question shall be put separately on any Clause of or Schedule to the Bill which a Minister of the Crown has signified an intention to leave out.

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(10) (a) Any Lords Amendments to the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(11) Paragraphs (2) to (11) of Standing Order No. 83F (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (10) of this Order.

Subsequent stages

(12) (a) Any further Message from the Lords on the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(13) Paragraphs (2) to (9) of Standing Order No. 83G (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (12) of this Order.

Reasons Committee

(14) Paragraphs (2) to (6) of Standing Order No. 83H (Programme orders: reasons committee) apply in relation to any committee to be appointed to draw up reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with this Order.
Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply so far as necessary for the purposes of this Order.

Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply in relation to any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(a) No Motion shall be made, except by a Minister of the Crown, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken, to recommit the Bill or to vary or supplement the provisions of this Order.

(b) No notice shall be required of such a Motion.

(c) Such a motion may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(d) The Question on such a Motion shall be put forthwith; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (c) shall thereupon be resumed.

(e) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on such a Motion.

(a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings to which this Order applies except by a Minister of the Crown.

(b) The Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

No debate shall be held in accordance with Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) at today's sitting after this Order has been agreed.

Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

No private business may be considered at today's sitting after this Order has been agreed.—(Wendy Morton.)

Northern Ireland Budget (No. 2) Bill

Second Reading

3.50 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

As I have stated to the House on a number of occasions over the 14 months that I have been in this role, and as my predecessors did previously, the UK Government have a responsibility, in the absence of a functioning devolved Government in Northern Ireland, to ensure good governance and to protect the interests of all parts of the community. We have a duty to safeguard public services and public finances. The Bill before the House today upholds that duty by giving certainty to Northern Ireland finances for the 2018-19 financial year and by enabling Northern Ireland Departments to continue to deliver public services into the first half of 2019-20.

Last year, the UK Government had to step in and ask Parliament to legislate for the 2018-19 budget for Northern Ireland. This was not a step that we wanted to take, but it was a necessary step to give a clear, legal basis to Northern Ireland Departments to enable them to manage resources and perform the important work that they continue to do in the absence of an Executive. I want to put on record once again my admiration for the work that the civil servants in the Northern Ireland civil service do in the absence of political leadership. The legislation that we passed, the Northern Ireland Budget Act 2018, did not set out any direction for how spending decisions should be made. Instead, it set out in law departmental spending allocations within which permanent secretaries could deliver on their respective responsibilities. That Act was passed in July. Since then, the Northern Ireland civil service has continued to assess where pressures lie across the system, and it has reallocated resources as required. As we approach the end of the financial year, those changes need to be put on to a legal footing, as is a standard part of any annual budgetary process, and that is what this Bill does.

In addition, the Bill will provide for a vote on account for the first half of next year, to give legal authority for managing day-to-day spending in the run-up to the usual main estimates process. This is a normal part of the estimates process. This year, however, following discussions with the Northern Ireland civil service on the pressures it faces in the year ahead, I am proposing in this Bill to provide a higher than normal level of vote on account of 70%.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): The Secretary of State will be well aware that, in evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, a considerable amount of criticism has been expressed of the budget allocation to the Education Department. In particular, we have heard evidence that primary schools have had to ask for donations of toilet roll, in addition to pencils and the other things that one would usually expect. Can the Secretary of State guarantee that, following the increase in the budget to the Department of Education—many other Departments are in the same situation—we will not see a repetition of primary schools in Northern Ireland asking for donations of toilet roll?
Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady makes a number of important points, the first being that we have rightly increased spending for the Department of Education. This is an area in which there is a clear need for increased spending, and the permanent secretary at the Department was keen to ensure that the Government were aware of that. That is why, in the allocations for 2019-20 that were set out in the written statement last week, there is an increase in spending power for the Department of Education. The hon. Lady also makes a point about how that spending happens. The difficulty in the absence of Ministers in Stormont is that spending cannot be directed from this House. She also refers to issues within education in Northern Ireland. There is an undoubted need for reform of the system to ensure that money is spent appropriately and gets to the frontline and to the children and students who need it most, but we need Ministers to do that, which is why Stormont must be restored as soon as possible.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I am interested in what the Secretary of State said in response to the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon). I am looking at the Secretary of State’s written statement and the announcement of an extra £140 million for education, health and, as it happens, justice, but she says that it was provided “in recognition of the lack of opportunity for more fundamental service reconfiguration over the last 12 months”.—[Official Report, 28 February 2019; Vol. 655, c. 23WS.]

This may be new money, but it will provide no new services and it comes as a result of a failure of the political process in Northern Ireland to reconfigure those services.

Karen Bradley: The additional funding for health and education is partly down to the new money that the Treasury has found—the £140 million—but it is also down to Barnett consequentials and other reasons. We have worked to ensure that the money that is needed by Departments, as requested by the permanent secretaries, is given to them, but the shadow Secretary of State is right that it is for business as usual activities. Major policy decisions cannot be taken at this stage because that needs political leadership.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend is right to say that this is not simply a matter of uplifting the amount of funding to education or healthcare; this is also about trying to work out how best to spend that money. Will any of the £4 million in transformation funding that she identified last month be used to try to work out how the footprint of the education and healthcare estate might be better utilised?

Karen Bradley: We are keen that the Northern Ireland civil service does the necessary work to prepare for the transformation of health and education and for the urgently needed reforms but, to be clear, the actual reforms can only be made once Ministers are in place in Stormont to make the decisions and give political direction.

Returning to the vote on account, the reason why it is 70% in this Bill, rather than the normal 45%, is that that recognises the increased spending pressures facing public services and the lack of Ministers in place to take reactive and decisive steps to respond to emerging or escalating pressures. It also recognises the uncertainty of the political situation in Northern Ireland in the months ahead. In the light of that context, such a level of vote on account is reasonable and provides the practical and legal certainties to protect public services in any circumstance and up until the point that Northern Ireland budget legislation for 2019-20 is taken through to secure funding for the full year. It goes without saying that I genuinely hope that a new Executive will be in place to take their own budget legislation forward for 2019-20, but this Government stand ready to take it through if needed.

To be clear, this Bill does not represent a budget for the year ahead. It does not seek to set out in legislation the departmental allocations that I outlined in my written statement on 28 February, because the headline allocations will require legislation later in the year. However, until that point, the vote on account in this Bill and the draft Northern Ireland budgetary position for 2019-20, as set out in my written statement last week, give the necessary clarity and certainty to Northern Ireland Departments to enable them to take decisions and plan and prepare for the year ahead.

Lady Hermon: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for allowing me to intervene for a second time. She has said twice in quick succession that the Bill is to allow a budget that takes into account any circumstances in Northern Ireland—that allows Departments to plan ahead. May I just mention Brexit to her? Can she actually tell us how much has been allocated in the Bill towards Brexit preparations and does that allocation take into account—heaven forbid—the possibility of a no-deal Brexit?

Karen Bradley: I repeat: the Bill is about putting on a statutory footing the spending that has already taken place. I will be happy to furnish the hon. Lady with information about money that Departments in Northern Ireland have spent on planning for Brexit, which covers all Brexit planning. The allocations in the written ministerial statement do include moneys that have been allocated from the Treasury for planning for Brexit, so that is in the written ministerial statement, but the budget today is about the money that has already been spent. I will be happy to give the hon. Lady full information about money that has been spent to date and up till the end of the month. We are putting that on a statutory footing today. The hon. Lady looks as if she is itching to intervene again.

Karen Bradley: There may be information on certain departmental spending, but, on the total, this is a number that is owned by NICS, not by the Northern Ireland Office, and I would not want to give the hon. Lady
just one bit of the jigsaw. I would like to give her the full picture, including all the money that has been spent on preparations this year. On the allocations for the future, this is to enable the vote on account to happen, but actually the departmental allocations will be properly done, through a budget next year. In the same way as we had a budget Bill last July, which put the 2018-19 spending on a statutory footing, this is the completion of that process for 2018-19. Another Bill will do that for 2019-20. However, I will of course write to the hon. Lady and ensure that she has full information about all the spending across all Departments, because as I say, that information is held by the NICS; it is not owned by the Northern Ireland Office and I want to get it absolutely correct for her.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I think it would be very useful for the House to have the information that the Secretary of State just mentioned. Given that, regrettably, we do not have a functioning Executive and Parliament in Northern Ireland, it would be useful for the House to have the information that the civil servants have given her on why there should be a budgetary increase in individual Departments—such as Justice, Education or Health—so that we have some way of understanding in this House what the budgetary pressures are and what influences are leading to the decisions that the Secretary of State is making. I think that would be very helpful to us all.

Karen Bradley: The written ministerial statement sets out the departmental allocations. Those are the moneys that the permanent secretaries have asked me to deliver to them. I cannot direct the spending within those Departments. I also cannot ask them exactly which work streams or programmes they will spend the money on, because in this House we do not have the Executive power to do that. However, I am making it possible for the spending that has already happened to have the statutory footing that it needs, and I am making possible the vote on account for next year, as agreed with the permanent secretaries of each Department.

It is not a satisfactory process. I do not deny that this is not the ideal way to do it. The ideal way to do this would be to have Ministers in Stormont who are able to direct departmental spending and to have a budget process that is done in the same way as the overall budget is done for the United Kingdom in the Treasury; but we are not in a situation where that can happen, so unfortunately, this is where we are.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP) rose—

Vernon Coaker rose—

Karen Bradley: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman again, and then I will make progress.

Vernon Coaker: I am not trying to criticise. I am not complaining or saying that the Secretary of State is wrong. All I am saying is that, for example, her statement states that £16.5 million goes to the police for EU exit preparations. So, somewhere along the line, the police have decided that they would like those additional moneys to help. All I am saying, as somebody who takes a keen interest in Northern Ireland, is that with that, or with the schools, or with health, it would be helpful, as far as possible, to have some idea about the reasons that that money has been requested—not to criticise it, but just to understand it better.

Karen Bradley: I understand the point the hon. Gentleman makes. He has significant experience in Northern Ireland and will know a great deal about it. The police put in a specific bid for additional resources for Brexit preparations. It went through the proper processes in the Treasury and this has been paid. I recognise his frustration about wanting more information here for parliamentarians, and I have supplied the information I am able to supply in my capacity as Secretary of State. Clearly, we are not looking at the future spending and, when we do the budget for 2019-20—I hope we will not have to, as I hope it will be done by Ministers in Stormont—I will bear in mind the points he has raised.

Emma Little Pengelly: At which point will the Secretary of State accept that this is an entirely unsustainable position? As has been outlined, there is no scrutiny in this process. I do not believe that such a process would take place anywhere in a democracy in the western world. This process is taking place completely behind closed doors in terms of what bids are being put forward and what bids are being accepted. The people of Northern Ireland are in a difficult position; they are between two positions. The first is that Sinn Féin is boycotting the Northern Ireland Assembly, so we do not have the right mechanisms in place to scrutinise and make decisions. The second is that the Secretary of State and this Government are refusing to put in place direct rule, which, although not desirable, is necessary. We have now had several years of this type of process where there is no scrutiny and no democratic accountability. When is that going to change?

Karen Bradley: Of course, there is full scrutiny of the Northern Ireland block grant—that is the estimates process that we went through last week in this House; this House is able to scrutinise the block grant. I well accept the point the hon. Lady makes about the undesirable level of scrutiny and about how the allocations are made between Departments. I do not disagree with her on that. It would be much better to have the full scrutiny process that a devolved Executive would be able to deliver. We are in a very unsatisfactory position. I would rather we were not doing this in this way, but to ensure that public services continue to be delivered and that public servants—the civil servants in Northern Ireland—have the statutory underpinning they need for the spending, we are taking forward this budget Bill. I would really rather we were not.
memorandum says that the Bill is being fast-tracked because there was a hope that the Executive would have been restored to make the provisions. When in the past two months was there any genuine prospect of the Assembly being restored to go through this process? Our Committee stage is to be constrained this afternoon—we might get an hour or we might get 45 minutes on the Floor of this House. That is not satisfactory; we have the tools and the mechanisms in Parliament for full Bill Committee consideration of the estimates and future allocations. There was also the opportunity for the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs to get into these discussions. The Departments are very good at appearing before the Committee chaired by the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison). We should have used those processes, rather than this constrained, fast-track process today.

Karen Bradley: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s concerns, but we have to be aware of the constitutional precedents that are set by changing the way we scrutinise these Bills. The way this Bill should be taken through is not as primary legislation; it should be an estimates process done in Stormont, in the same way as we vote on our Budget in this House. We do not have scrutiny of the Budget resolutions upstairs; we have a Finance Bill that puts them into legislation, but we vote on Ways and Means resolutions on the Floor of the House. Unfortunately, we do not have the ability to do that in Stormont, for well documented reasons. What I want is to see those politicians in Northern Ireland doing the right thing, coming back to Stormont and forming the Executive, so that all those proper processes can be applied. We should not kid ourselves that some substitute arrangement will offer a different approach; we have to see devolved government restored in Stormont.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP) rose—

Karen Bradley: I know the right hon. Gentleman wants to come in, but I want to make some progress, because I am conscious that others want to speak and I want to make sure everyone has a chance to be heard.

Let me go back to the work we are doing today. Like last year, the draft budget sets headline allocations only. It will remain for Northern Ireland permanent secretaries to use the powers of this budget legislation and the draft budget position to take decisions to maintain public services and live within their means. Also like last year, the Bill does not propose any new moneys to be voted on for Northern Ireland. The totals to which it relates are either raised locally or have been subject to previous votes in Parliament, most recently in respect of the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) (No. 2) Bill, which has passed through this House and is now in the other House. Instead, the Bill looks to confirm spending totals for 2018-19, to ensure that the Northern Ireland civil service has a secure legal basis for its spending in the past year. Taken as a whole, it represents the minimum necessary intervention to secure public finances at this juncture.

Let me turn briefly to the Bill’s contents, which largely rehearse what I set out to the House in spring last year when I introduced the Northern Ireland Budget (Anticipation and Adjustments) Act 2018. In short, the Bill authorises Northern Ireland Departments and certain other bodies to incur expenditure and use resources for the financial year ending on 31 March 2019—this month.

Clause 1 authorises the issue of £16.8 billion out of the Consolidated Fund of Northern Ireland. The allocation levels for each Northern Ireland Department and the other bodies in receipt of the funds are set out in schedule 1, which also states the purposes for which the funds are to be used.

Clause 2 authorises the use of resources amounting to some £20 billion in the year ending 31 March 2019 by the Northern Ireland Departments and other bodies listed in subsection (3).

Clause 3 sets revised limits on the accruing resources, including both operating and non-operating accruing resources in the current financial year. All are largely as they appeared in the Northern Ireland Budget Act 2018. The revised totals for Departments appear in schedules 1 and 2.

Clause 4 sets out the power for the Northern Ireland civil service to issue out of the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund some £11.8 billion in cash for the forthcoming financial year. That is the vote-on-account provision that I have already outlined. It is linked to clause 6, which does the same in terms of resources. The value is set at around 70% of the sums available in both regards in the previous financial year. Schedules 3 and 4 operate on the same basis, with each departmental allocation simply set at 70% of the previous year, and clause 5 permits some temporary borrowing powers for cash-management purposes.

As I have already noted, all these sums relate to those that have already been voted for by Parliament, together with revenue generated locally in Northern Ireland. There is no new money in the Bill; there is simply the explicit authority to spend in full the moneys that have already been allocated.

Lady Hermon: May I record my serious disappointment that in the allocations we are going to approve today there appears to be absolutely no money at all set aside for the victims of historical institutional abuse? Will the Secretary of State confirm that the head of the Northern Ireland civil service, David Sterling, indicated that the Government would have a moral obligation, after the consultation on the Hart recommendations had ended, to bring the legislation through this House if the Assembly was not sitting? Will the Secretary of State honour that moral obligation to the victims of historical institutional abuse in Northern Ireland?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady has raised this issue on several occasions and I know how strongly she feels about it. I have met survivors of historical institutional abuse and what they went through is shocking. As she will know, the consultation the Northern Ireland civil service started is still open. Once that consultation has been completed and the recommendations from it are clear, we will consider them in the normal way. To reassure her, the vote on account that we are talking about is merely on 70% of the previous year’s spending. We are not doing anything in this Bill other than giving the Departments in Northern Ireland the ability to continue to spend money up to the level of 70% of the spending in the previous year. We are not directing them on how they spend that money.
Sammy Wilson: May I take the Secretary of State back to where she started, before she began going through the departmental allocations and the detail of the Bill? The whole point—it has been made time and again by Democratic Unionist party Members—is that there is no scrutiny of how the departmental allocations were reached. She is right that that scrutiny would normally be done through Stormont, but Stormont is not operating. A mechanism is available here, but there seems to be reluctance to use it because of the possible reaction from Sinn Féin. Not only is Sinn Féin stopping scrutiny in Stormont; the fear of how it will react is stopping scrutiny here. When will the Secretary of State realise that Sinn Féin cannot block the scrutiny of how money is spent in Northern Ireland by keeping the doors of Stormont shut and causing fear here about how it may react when we try to do the job in this place?

Karen Bradley: I know how strongly the right hon. Gentleman feels about that point, which he has raised on several occasions. He will know that we consulted on the process with all five main parties in Northern Ireland, with the Opposition and with the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee to allow some prior scrutiny of the figures. All parties had full sight of the figures that we published in last week’s written ministerial statement. He is absolutely right that normal scrutiny procedures are not in place—they will be in place only with the restoration of devolution—but I caution him against trying to create artificial scrutiny processes that might well set a precedent for the future across all the devolved nations. The right scrutiny processes are available to respect the constitutional arrangements across the whole United Kingdom and all the devolved Administrations.

Civil servants are taking decisions—not major policy decisions, but the decisions that the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018 enables them to make and that we want them to be able to make. We have to be very careful about the civil service’s separation and independence from scrutiny by political masters. It is the political decisions that need scrutiny, not the decisions of civil servants. We would like to see Departments given full scrutiny in Stormont, as happens in this House, but we have to be very careful about the constitutional arrangements.

That brings me back to my point that the Bill would ordinarily have been taken through the Assembly. Clause 7 therefore includes a series of adaptations that ensure that, once approved by both Houses in Westminster, the Bill will be treated as though it were an Assembly budget Act. That will enable Northern Ireland public finances to continue to function, notwithstanding the absence of an Executive.

Alongside the Bill, I have laid before the House, as a Command Paper, a set of supplementary estimates for the Departments and bodies covered by the budget Bill. Those estimates, which have been prepared by the Northern Ireland Department of Finance, set out the breakdown of resource allocation in greater detail.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): When I was over in Northern Ireland recently, I realised to my horror that childcare is not widely available there, as it is in GB. People told me that some money had previously been allocated for childcare, but it seems that all the money for education, early years and childcare in the Bill is being allocated towards equal pay claims rather than provision to help women go to work, so this is a cracking day for women in Northern Ireland. To go back to the scrutiny conversation, the details seem to be very cloudy about where the previous money has gone and why there is no childcare in Northern Ireland. Could the Secretary of State answer that point?

Karen Bradley: This is a very technical Bill to put on a statutory footing the moneys that we have already voted through the House or that have been raised locally. The departmental allocations that the hon. Lady questions—how they have been bid for. Secondly, there cannot be a prejudice on behalf of civil servants about the moneys that they need. The decision to direct them, those programmes finish. The answer is devolved government in Stormont. That is the way in which there will be proper scrutiny and proper political accountability, and there is no alternative.

Emma Little Pengelly: In Northern Ireland, we have a childcare strategy called Bright Start, and a significant amount of money was allocated to each of its themes and activities. I concur with the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) that we do not have the 30 hours’ free childcare; the Department of Education in Northern Ireland was supposed to work on that. This illustrates two issues. First, we do not know what further allocations are being made under the childcare strategy. There has been no information on that thus far, and nor has there been any information about whether those allocations were bid for. Secondly, there cannot be a decision about 30 hours’ free childcare, despite all the work in the Department, because there is no Minister to take that decision. Sinn Féin are boycotting the Northern Ireland Assembly, so we cannot make the decision there. Will the Secretary of State please step up and start making those kinds of decision for Northern Ireland?

Karen Bradley: As I have said, there is no good alternative for the people of Northern Ireland other than the politicians that they have elected making the decisions on their behalf in Northern Ireland, fully scrutinised and fully accountable to the people who elected them. There is no alternative, and that is why we want to see politicians back in Northern Ireland.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I can hear my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) making noises from a sedentary position.

Kelly Tolhurst: [Interruption.] I can hear my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) making noises from a sedentary position.

Karen Bradley: As hon. right and hon. Members will note, this is a different process from that which we might ordinarily see for estimates at Westminster, whereby the estimates document precedes the formal Budget legislation and is separately approved. That would also
be the case at the Assembly. If it is Westminster that is passing the main Northern Ireland budget Bill later in the year, that Bill would contain modifications to the Government Resources and Accounts Act (Northern Ireland) 2001 to reflect the departure from the usual process.

As I hope hon. right and hon. Members will agree, this is very much a technical step that we are taking as we approach the end of the financial year. It provides a secure legal footing for the Northern Ireland civil service and demonstrates that this Government will uphold our responsibilities to the people of Northern Ireland.

As I conclude, I will set out once again a point that I have made several times before to this House. The UK Government are steadfastly committed to the Belfast agreement. Legislating on Northern Ireland budgetary matters at Westminster is not a step I want to take; nor is it one I want to take again. I am determined to restore the political institutions set out in the 1998 agreement and its successors at the earliest possible opportunity.

The people of Northern Ireland have now been without a power-sharing devolved Government for over two years. They need their representatives back in Stormont, taking decisions on the issues that matter to them. I know that an agreement to restore the Executive is achievable. I met the party leaders of the five main parties on 15 February at Stormont House, and I spoke to them again last week to discuss a further period of intensive talks to restore the Executive. In those discussions, all parties bar one—which was not able to meet me, rather than anything else—reaffirmed their commitment to a restored Executive and said that they wanted to continue to work towards that aim. I am absolutely determined to bring this about, and that is my focus and priority. I will do everything I can to support parties in coming together to find an agreement that can restore the power-sharing devolved government that is so needed. In its absence, this Bill is a reminder that the UK Government will always uphold their responsibilities for political stability and good governance in Northern Ireland, and I commend it to the House.

4.23 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): May I begin by offering a small prediction that, sadly, there will be very little coverage of this debate in the Northern Ireland media or beyond? That is a tragedy, especially when I compare it to a debate that might take place in a large local authority—in my city region, for example. There would be massively more local media interest in such a debate for a particular reason: there is engagement with the political process. At the moment, people are becoming disillusioned with the political process in Northern Ireland, and that is beyond a matter of regret; it is a matter of danger for us all, and we should recognise that.

As the Secretary of State said, there has been no functioning Stormont for over two years, as the Stormont Executive and Assembly collapsed on 9 January 2017. The Secretary of State has a unique role, in that at no point other than when the present Lord Murphy introduced a budget to establish the Assembly has a Secretary of State delivered a budget. This Secretary of State has now delivered two.

This is set against a background of a seeming lack of action on re-establishing the Stormont Executive and Assembly. I know that the political parties in Stormont will argue about who is responsible. However, the reality is that during the more than two years that have gone by, the level of activity has been low. The Secretary of State has met the political parties, but not regularly. A little over a year ago, when the Prime Minister went over to be part of this along with the Taoiseach, people thought and hoped, rightly, that there would be a resolution to the situation. The Prime Minister has not been engaged consistently since then. I am bound to compare that with John Major when he was Prime Minister before the Good Friday agreement was signed, with Tony Blair during the years when he was Prime Minister, and with David Cameron when he was Prime Minister. I have to say to the Secretary of State that we must see more concerted action. We have to see some ambition for real change.

I know that this will not please everybody in the Chamber, but let me quote Michelle O’Neill, the leader of Sinn Féin at Stormont, who said, when talking about a serious and meaningful talks process that removes obstacles to proper power sharing and delivers a successful outcome in restoring the Assembly, that “we have yet to see Karen Bradley prioritise such a process”.

The Secretary of State may be cynical about Michelle O’Neill. I know that other hon. Members in the Chamber certainly will be. However, the same message is coming through to me from all the political parties that this Government have not been properly engaged in re-establishing the Stormont Assembly.

The Secretary of State has said to me: “This Government will continue to observe all our commitments under the Belfast/Good Friday agreement.”—[Official Report, 13 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 906.]

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman quoted the leader of Sinn Féin’s explanation of situations that had to come about in advance of the talks process. Does he agree that that sounded remarkably like a precondition to talks as well as a precondition to going into Stormont?

Tony Lloyd: When John Major was engaged in the talks process leading up to the Good Friday agreement, and Tony Blair even more intensely so, there were many preconditions on the table—of course there were. That is the nature of a talks process. Anybody who has ever engaged in meaningful negotiations knows that people do not walk in with no agenda, but the talks process has to get them together and iron out the differences. It has, in the end, to say what is held more in common and what is more important.

I will go through some of the things that, in the end, are more important when we look at what is not taking place in Northern Ireland now—some of the things that hon. Members have already raised. The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) mentioned the Hart inquiry. The Secretary of State has heard the demands in this Chamber, on a regular basis, that she take action. We have to look at the people across Northern Ireland. The politicians from all sides say that they want to get back to Stormont. Yes, we have to test the competence and the willingness of politicians really to negotiate, but the trade unions, the business community and civil society are also saying, “Let’s get Stormont back working.” That is so important, because without it the decisions are not being made that can make a material difference.
The business community and the trade unions have recently said to me that they cannot get decisions made on infrastructure investment. I know that the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) will agree that the Derry and Strabane city deal is fundamental, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karín Smyth) will talk later about the pressing importance of a decision on the medical school there. Decisions are required on the upgrading of the A5 and the A6 and on higher and further education. This might sound like a trivial issue, but decisions are required on sewers in Belfast. The sewerage system in Belfast requires £800 million. People may wonder why that matters, but from 2021, no new facility will be connectable to that water and sewerage system. We want to see the Belfast city deal bring in new offices, industries and hotels, but that will not be viable if the sewerage system is not capable of taking them on board. That is not a joke; it is very serious.

Gavin Robinson: The hon. Gentleman is making an important point. I want to give another example, which is the Belfast power plant. When the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Bill went through the House, we indicated the need to get planning consent for that, so that it could form part of our capacity auctions and the Utility Regulator could factor it into our future energy requirements. Without it, we will not be able to keep the lights on. Four months on from that Act being passed, we still do not have a decision, and we need decisions where they can be taken.

Tony Lloyd: The hon. Gentleman is right. Electricity is fundamental to our way of life. It is not a bolt-on extra, and it is not just a question of keeping the lights on; it is a question of keeping hospitals working and the world of work functioning. That is fundamental.

I want to touch on one area of progress. I am delighted to see that £55 million has been put into the budget for the legacy coronial process, which is a really important step forward. That is a decision by the Department of Justice, within the framework of this budget. However, there will be a consequence of that coronial process. If it is successful, which we all hope it will be, it will put pressure on the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the police ombudsman and the Public Prosecution Service. Those bodies will all need a resource base that allows them to complete the work of the coronial process. Otherwise, we will be giving an illusion to the families of victims of crime.

In that context, I also want to mention pensions for the victims of violence. There are issues to be resolved, but nobody in the Chamber would disagree that those pensions are necessary. All these things are urgent, because we have an ageing population, whether it is Hart victims or victims of the violence during the troubles. They will die without resolution of these issues unless action is taken.

I am bound to compare this issue to what we will discuss tomorrow, which is the contentious issue of tariffs under the callable heat impost and the Government are acting—even though it is outwith the norms of Government power, according to the Secretary of State’s definition—because it is about money. The issues relating to the Hart victims and victims of terrorism are human issues, and they are just as urgent. If we can act on one such issue, we should think seriously about acting on others.

Sir Mike Penning: I have listened carefully to what the shadow Secretary of State has said, and he has made some very reasonable points. I would like to ask him two questions. First, it seems that there is little movement, and we can blame a lot of different people, but at the end of the day it takes two to tango and Sinn Féin needs to come forward and be part of the process. If there is no movement, does he think that direct rule is the answer, two years on? Secondly, he talked about victims. Has he forgotten the victims who were our soldiers, our people and our policemen on the streets of Northern Ireland, who are now being dragged before the courts? Does he not think that they need a mention?

Tony Lloyd: On the first question, it is very reasonable to ask what happens next. We simply cannot allow this vacuum to continue—decisions are not being made. I would say to the right hon. Gentleman that, from my perspective at the moment, I still think we have to say that the hope is for a restoration of the Stormont structures, because if we give up on that, we are giving up on at least the principle of what the Good Friday agreement delivered.

Democracy matters. The right hon. Gentleman would not accept the situation—I say this to him seriously—if I said that we were going to abrogate his local council’s need to function. This is not about getting two to tango, but probably about getting at least five parties in Stormont to tango, plus the Government here in London and, actually, the Government in Dublin. We have to see a much more concerted effort to get people around the table to try to break the logjam. If we start raising the spectre of direct rule at this point, we are saying that we are giving up on power sharing.

Sir Mike Penning: I do not quite understand the point the shadow Secretary of State is making. If a council is failing to deliver the services we would expect from it, the Government step in and deliver them, as we have seen in Northamptonshire. We have a situation in the Province where there is no governance. We cannot question what civil servants are doing, quite rightly, because they are civil servants. However, they are running the show, which is not a democracy. I ask again: if not today or next week, when, for Labour, does direct rule come in?

Tony Lloyd: I simply repeat to the right hon. Gentleman that I do not want to see direct rule—I genuinely do not—and there are massive issues with it. Some of my hon. Friends served as Ministers during the period of direct rule, and it is a very difficult and undesirable thing. I will say this, and it may give him a small hint: the Labour Government did bring in direct rule, so none of us can say that it will never happen. We are not there yet, but we are in a position where we have to see greater activity from the Secretary of State and—yes, of course—from the leaders of the political parties. I will return to that theme in a little while, because I want to make another point in that context, but I am definitely not giving up yet on Stormont being brought back into operation.
The right hon. Gentleman also asked me a totally separate question. By the way, let me make it clear to him that there were soldiers who were victims themselves, members of the then Royal Ulster Constabulary who were victims. Many of them take the view that the justice process has to continue because they want justice or, very often, the families of soldiers and serving police officers want to know what happened to their loved ones. I think that is still a legitimate case to make, and it is one I will continue to make. We will no doubt debate this on other occasions.

Dr Murrison: As always, I am following all the hon. Gentleman has to say with a great deal of interest. He has mentioned victims, and he is right to do so. Will he say whether he would include within his definition of a victim those who are victims by virtue of actions by their own hand?

Tony Lloyd: I am afraid—to give the hon. Gentleman the answer he does not want to hear—that, yes, I think so. We have to cut through this very difficult situation, and we cannot delay payments to victims. It is controversial, and I am very well aware of that, but if we are going to delay payments to victims across the piece to get the perfect, then we may be waiting forever, and that would be at the expense of the ageing population of people who are now dependent on seeing some real progress.

Dr Murrison: I do appreciate that this is a sensitive point. In saying that, however, does the hon. Gentleman accept that he is condoning criminality, because that is what compensating criminals would be? It is an extraordinary thing—indeed, I would say, an unprecedented thing in this country—that the state should seek to compensate those who damage themselves by their own hand while engaged in terrorist activities.

Tony Lloyd: I do understand the difficulties. Let me simply say that this is probably not the right time to pursue this debate, although I am more than content that we ought to pursue it, because bringing to a conclusion the question of victims’ payments is clearly right and just, and it is important that it is done in this era, not simply deferred forever. However, it is probably not for today. I hope I have answered the hon. Gentleman’s question as directly as I could—I think it was a clear answer—and we will continue the conversation.

Sir Mike Penning: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Tony Lloyd: Yes, but I do not want to continue this for too long.

Sir Mike Penning: It is clear that the hon. Gentleman does not want to talk about this issue, but it is vital, when we are talking about money that will go to schemes to develop the whole argument about victims, that we address the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison). We have plenty of time to do it now. How can it be right that someone who has attempted to kill a civilian, a member of the police force or soldiers on active duty gets compensation from the victims fund when I was at the Ministry of Justice, and it is not perfect, but, for sure, one thing that I would not allow was that.

Tony Lloyd: It is rather interesting that the right hon. Gentleman says that I do not want to discuss the issue. I did. I answered the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) very directly. I do not know what the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) wants me to say beyond what I have said. If he wants to check the record, he should please do so. I am happy to continue the debate. If any Member wants to apply for an Adjournment debate, I will certainly turn up. They can ask the Secretary of State the same difficult question. It is a difficult question, but what we cannot do is freeze the process for victims, who, as I and the right hon. Gentleman agree, are absolutely worthy of compensation. We have to get on with it; that is the issue today. We need progress on all these issues, the difficult ones as well, then let us debate the finer points.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): There needs to be a comprehensive settlement, but are we not coming up against the same problem that was discussed earlier? The question of transparency in the Bill and the limits that the Secretary of State sets for disclosure of all items confine us equally when we talk about any one element of the Bill. We need to look at it globally—at all of it. We need some way to get through the lack of transparency to find out where the expenditure is going, how it is being asked for, and what is being sought.

Tony Lloyd: My hon. Friend makes a similar point about the lack of transparency to that which has already been made by a number of Members, including the hon. Members for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) and for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson). They are right to make that point.

Any local authority would have a far more dignified debate than the one we are having today about the length of time involved and the capacity to scrutinise. The Secretary of State says that we would create a new precedent were we to change these things, but we are in very different circumstances because we do not have direct rule and we do not have a functioning Stormont structure. We are already in unprecedented terrain, and we have to find ways to make sure that transparency and scrutiny are done far better.

There are specific questions I want to come on to, but it is probably worth making the point that a lot of people in Northern Ireland are already concerned about the lack of engagement with the budgetary process. I know that they are not represented in this House, but I want to quote the Ulster Unionist party’s finance spokesman, Steve Aiken, who said:

“It’s a disgrace... that the NIO handled the engagement on next year’s budget so appallingly. The Secretary of State said in her budget statement that she has discussed the budget situation with the political parties—she has not. Tokenistic efforts do not constitute actual engagement.

Over the last ten days there have been three NIO budget meetings. The first ended in farce as the political parties were asked to consider options without being told what those options were, the second ended with only minimal information provided, and the third—just two hours before her statement was published—lasted minutes with again only bare information provided.”
That is not good enough to reassure the wider public or even people in this House that the process is transparent and accountable or has any processes for scrutiny. They simply are not there.

I have some specific questions and I hope that the Minister of State will pick up on them in his response. The Secretary of State said that this was retrospective, and of course not all of it is, because it sets out the budgetary headings for the coming year. It is important to recognise that. There is a real question. If Stormont were to begin to operate again at the beginning of April, would this budgetary process be transferable and amenable by an elected Stormont? Would it be able to change the budgetary headings?

Karen Bradley: That is absolutely the case. The shadow Secretary of State is absolutely right. The Bill puts on a statutory footing the spending that has already happened and that which will happen in the next three weeks up to the end of March. It also allows for a vote on account of 70% of next year’s spending, but nothing about this budget would this budgetary process be transferable and amenable by an elected Stormont? Would it be able to change the budgetary headings?

Tony Lloyd: I very much welcome that reassurance. Will the Secretary of State also consider this point? The frame of reference in previous budgets is that 45% of the spend has been moved forward. That would take us up to September, roughly. This year, unusually, the Secretary of State has put in 70% of next year’s spend. That speaks to the point raised by the hon. Member for Belfast East, who made the legitimate point that there is no emergency. The original ambition was to put this through using emergency powers, but there is no emergency whatsoever. This could have been done at any other time, whether in March, April or May—well, the retrospective part cannot, but the part for next year could be.

Karen Bradley: It is probably helpful if I clarify that point. We have to put on a statutory footing, by the end of March, the spending for the financial year 2018-19—the year we are in. That is what we are doing. The vote on account of 70%, rather than the 45% we did last year, is because of the recognition of the pressures on the Departments in Northern Ireland as a result of having no Ministers, and because we have additional moneys coming through. If an infrastructure decision is taken, money will need to be spent. What I did not want to do was constrain Departments to be legally able to have only up to 45% of the previous year’s spending. The 70% reflects the fact that, because there are no Ministers and because of the unique circumstances in Northern Ireland the fact that there may well be decisions on infrastructure and on other issues that may require accelerated spending in a Department, I wanted to provide flexibility so we do not have to come back sooner and bring forward the legislation required to put that on a statutory footing for the next year. We will of course have to do that at some point; what we hope is that it will actually be done in Stormont.
there is no Stormont Assembly, we are all paying the cost in worse services, financially, and in the erosion of democratic values.

We do not intend to divide the House on budgetary items. It would not be appropriate do so because they give permission to spend or are the legal ratification of spending processes. However, this shakes us all to say that there must now be real effort put in to restoring Stormont. I have never doubted the Secretary of State’s sincerity in wanting to see Stormont restored, but I doubt the Government’s capacity. That is the real issue that divides us. I repeat what I have said previously: if the Prime Minister is so preoccupied with Brexit that she has no time to look at devolution to Northern Ireland, that is a fundamental political mistake that we will rue in time to come. We need ambition. Those talks must take place, and the Government in Dublin must be involved.

Some time ago, when I arranged the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference with the Secretary of State, she said:

“I remind him that that body has met twice in the past 12 months.”

—[Official Report, 13 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 906.]

That is true, and those occasions were the first in 145 months. That is not acceptable.

Karen Bradley: It is worth putting on the record the fact that the last time the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference had met was in 2007. Clearly, although the institutions were running and Stormont was fully running with full power sharing, the appropriate east-west conversations could happen through other bodies. It is clear that that has happened, but it is a consequence of Stormont’s not operating and there needing to be a forum for east-west communication.

Tony Lloyd: As the Secretary of State knows, I have asked for the BIIGC to be convened regularly. Back in the day, it sometimes met three or four times a year, particularly in the days of direct rule, when there was an ambition to get us back to a functioning Stormont. I have asked her in the past when it will meet again. Those meetings need to be timetabled and put on a regular basis so that we know it will meet and continue to be an active partner with the British Government in achieving the ambition of a restored Stormont.

I am aware that I have spoken for some time—I have given way a lot—and although we have the time, as the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead reminded me, it is probably time I devoted it to other people.

4.55 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s hard work over the past several months in trying to resolve the impasse at Stormont. She has worked tirelessly. If I may be ever so slightly critical of the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd), I think he is being a little harsh—uncharacteristically—about the efforts of the Government to restart this process and about the Prime Minister’s efforts. I do not particularly appreciate shuttle diplomacy of the sort we have seen in the past—there are other more effective ways of achieving the same end—but he has to accept the extraordinary difficulty that currently pertains in Northern Ireland and the intransigence of some of the actors therein.

Like the Secretary of State, I hope that we restore the Executive in the near future—more in hope than expectation—and I understand why she is behaving as she is in trying to keep the ship on an even keel while trying not to interfere in matters that are properly devolved. It is a dilemma she faces on a daily basis. She well knows that the longer this goes on, the more the people of Northern Ireland suffer and the more their lived experience deteriorates. In that context, I congratulate once again the Northern Ireland civil service and David Sterling. It is important to do that. This is unprecedented, and Northern Ireland should be very proud of its civil service. I also thank and commend the work of the Northern Ireland Office under the strong leadership of Sir Jonathan Stephens. It is often forgotten in this mix, but it has done an excellent job in trying to keep things going.

Clearly, I welcome the Bill, which is largely of a technical nature, but I share the concerns expressed about scrutiny. I am not entirely clear that this measure should be dealt with as an urgent matter, as referred to in paragraph 27 of the guidance notes. It could have been far more elective than that. Scrutiny is important. I accept that the Secretary of State is avoiding at all costs making decisions on important matters relating to Northern Ireland that are properly devolved, but this place has to assume some responsibility for scrutiny of these important matters, and I am not sure we are doing justice to that process.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): My hon. Friend says the Bill is of a technical nature, and I agree in some respects, but ultimately it authorises the spending of billions of pounds in Northern Ireland. Can it really be called merely technical when it is so substantive in nature? On scrutiny, despite all the money going to Northern Ireland, there has been very little progress in getting it directed in a way that meets the needs of people in Northern Ireland since the priorities were first set. If we are to be in this situation again in 12 months, we will need to reflect on how we can do this better.

Dr Murrison: My hon. Friend makes a good point. We are in uncharted waters. It is difficult to hold to account Ministers who are not making decisions. It is not clear where accountability lies in this process. I hesitate to say we are making it up as we go along—clearly that would be unfair—but it is difficult to know precisely whom to hold to account, which is the job of this place.

Of course we have organisations such as the Northern Ireland Audit Office, which does its best to ensure that public funds are being disbursed in a reasonable manner, and there are other mechanisms for Members to attempt to shed light on the position and hold the Executive to account. Ultimately that process may end up in the courts through judicial review, but the Secretary of State is very keen for that not to happen, hence the guidance that she issued recently. However, I entirely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) that the whole thing is unsatisfactory. I suspect that if the Secretary of State were answering his point, she would say that the solution is very straightforward, and it is the restoration of the Executive.

I must say that I worry about the state of Northern Ireland and where it is going, given the lack of Ministers. The public are often rather cynical about us politicians,
Dr Murrison:

but I think this process has shown that Ministers have utility in improving people’s lives. David Sterling himself has referred to “slow decay and stagnation” in Northern Ireland. Those are strong words, and I take them very seriously: I think he is absolutely right. Very few of us have anything to do with Northern Ireland will not be impressed by the sense there that people are being let down by their political class, and that is an indictment of us all. I will not pin the blame on any one party or set of politicians, but it is incumbent on us all to ensure that proper governance is restored to Northern Ireland at the earliest available opportunity.

I accept the arguments for the uplift in the vote on account for the financial year 2019-20, because that strikes me as a pragmatic way ahead, but it is quite unusual. Of course I accept everything that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has to say—she is a person of great honour and integrity—but, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire pointed out, the job of this place is ultimately to scrutinise, and this 70% uplift is somewhat unusual. I therefore place great emphasis on the opportunity that we are having—and, if I may say so, my Select Committee is having—to delve into why the uplift is needed. It may be expedient, but expediency is not necessarily sufficient.

I also accept that the Bill does not imply any particular decisions, political or otherwise, except, of course, of the so-called flagship projects to which the Secretary of State referred in her written ministerial statement on 28 February, which include the A6, the York street interchange and the mother and children’s hospital. Those projects are unobjectionable and I believe that everyone in Northern Ireland wants to see them, so I think that the Secretary of State is on very safe ground. Nevertheless, they are big infrastructure projects, which, in the normal course of things, would be subject to intense scrutiny one way or the other. That scrutiny clearly cannot come from Stormont, as Stormont is not working, but it falls to someone, and it really falls to us, because we are the default position. I am not clear in my mind that those big projects and the planned expenditure on them, are being given the scrutiny that they deserve.

At the risk of being accused of being a pedant, I should like the Minister, when he sums up the debate, to clarify what the £4 million allocated to transformation is being spent on. I alluded to that earlier in a brief intervention. “Transformation” is very politically loaded, because it implies that something is being transformed into something else. It is important to know what is in the minds of those who are doing the transforming. I know that £4 million is not a great deal of money, but it would be useful to know what it is being spent on, because it implies a particular direction in terms of the outcomes that are being sought. I understand from what has been said previously that it is intended to make public services more sustainable. “Sustainable” is one of those words that sound innocuous, but it does imply change, and when change impacts on public services, it becomes politically contentious and, again, politically loaded. We therefore need to be told in a reasonable amount of detail how that relatively small sum is being disbursed.

I welcome the real-terms increase for health and education. My Select Committee has taken the view that it should get involved in both those areas. They are both areas that in the normal way of things we would be firmly told to set aside since they are devolved matters, but nobody else is looking at these particularly important areas of public policy at the moment and we have taken that as licence to exert some level of scrutiny. It has been very clear to us that not only is transformation needed in both areas, but that we need to look at making root-and-branch changes particularly in relation to footprint, to ensure that public money is spent properly and outcomes are improved.

In healthcare in particular, outcomes in Northern Ireland are really not good at all. The people of Northern Ireland deserve much better. We have heard in our Committee about issues to do with education, and I think we will be drawn to conclude that the footprint is part of the problem. All these things in all our constituencies up and down the country would ordinarily be matters of acute political interest in which politicians would be heavily involved, and there would be public meetings and all manner of things. The hon. Member for Rochdale who speaks for the Opposition was absolutely right to draw that comparison in his opening remarks, because were this to happen in my constituency I know I would be attending public meetings and doing all sorts of things that simply do not happen in Northern Ireland because of the absence of normal politics there at the moment. What is important however is that, wherever we can, we make sure we have some level of scrutiny, and that is why in its small way my Select Committee has taken upon itself investigations into health and education, and will be reporting very shortly.

I wonder whether the Secretary of State, or the Minister who replies, can update the House on what the £130 million transferred from capital for the next financial year to deal with public service resource pressures is being spent on. It has been referred to already and is a substantial sum of money. We really do need some level of granularity to ensure that money is best spent on areas where it will have the biggest impact. It is of concern, obviously, when money is transferred from capital to revenue, because it implies that there will be a backlog in due course of capital spend not being done at the moment that will have to be made good in the fullness of time.

Will the Minister say why the Executive Office vote is being uplifted by 4.4%? On the face of it that seems remarkable, and, knowing how eager the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) is to scrutinise these areas, she might have it in mind to press Ministers further on this when she speaks. It is remarkable that when we do not have an Executive in place, the Executive Office should be having an uplift of 4.4%. I would have thought the reverse would be the case.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the most heartbreaking pressures brought to the attention of his Committee is that of special educational needs children in the education sector, and that some of the money he has identified would be far better allocated to addressing that particular and acute need that affects everyone on these Benches, and indeed those who do not even come to this House?

Dr Murrison: Yes, I very much do, and if the hon. Gentleman wants to attend my Adjournment debate tomorrow on the subject of special educational needs...
in Wiltshire, perhaps he will find some commonality between his situation and my own as a constituency MP. [Interruption.] I am looking forward to the contribution of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon); I would be very disappointed if he did not contribute to my debate. He will be very welcome, while of course trying to remain in order since I suspect his knowledge of special educational needs in Wiltshire is somewhat limited—not that that will necessarily stop him.

May I press Ministers on how confidence and supply money is being spent? Of course spending in general in Northern Ireland uses guidance set by the collapsed Executive. That is perfectly right and proper, and to use that trajectory to guide spending is perfectly legitimate, but that justification obviously falls away in relation to confidence and supply money; the guidebook is not there, which makes it of particular interest.

For example, under the non-ring-fenced resource departmental expenditure limit—RDEL—£100 million is being allowed for health transformation. Health transformation is surely needed, but it is politically sensitive. We in this place really do deserve to know how that money is being spent, but we are none the wiser. Under CDEL—the capital departmental expenditure limit—there is £200 million for infrastructure. Again, that is highly politically sensitive stuff, and almost certainly involves projects that will be warmly welcomed by the people of Northern Ireland, but our job is scrutiny, and one way or the other, scrutiny must be done. I fear that it is not being done at the moment.

We are sort of being asked to sign this off, although the Secretary of State is saying that she has no input into decision making within this process. Nevertheless, the mere fact that we have a Bill before us today means that we have to accept some level of responsibility. I am left with a sinking feeling that I do not have the information necessary to do this confidently, yet it needs to be done, because the consequences of not doing it would be immense. This is putting right hon. and hon. Members in something of an invidious position, because we do not have the level of detail or granularity that we deserve. Paragraph 27 of the guidance notes claims that the Bill needs to be implemented “urgently”. I think it deserves. Paragraph 27 of the guidance notes claims that the Bill needs to be implemented “urgently”, but this really should not happen at the expense of confidence and supply money; the guidebook is not there, which makes it of particular interest.

The collapse of the Executive and the subsequent failure to deal with the situation have placed huge, unsustainable stress on the civil service in Northern Ireland. I join the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) in praising the Northern Irish civil service for all the work it has done in these tough times without an Executive. In our opinion, direct rule can never be countenanced, but as the shambolic Brexit process is now a central reason for the ongoing crisis, the UK Government have a responsibility to ensure that talks progress swiftly.

Amid ongoing austerity, the absence of decision making is straining Northern Irish public services. Decisions are urgently required to provide direction and funding to vital services. The current conditions are placing particular pressures on health and education, which are the most important services that a Government can deliver. It is for this reason that I want to make it clear that I do not begrudge the additional money that is going to be made available for public services in Northern Ireland—far from it. We have been calling for additional public spending from Westminster for years. However, it must be said that, under our agreed devolved settlement in this precious Union of equals, both Scotland and Wales should also receive additional funding. Successive UK Governments have inflicted brutal austerity measures on Scotland and Wales, as well as on Northern Ireland. That extra funding could be a small step towards repairing this recklessly inflicted damage. Indeed, if the Barnett formula were applied as it should be, Scotland would receive an extra £400 million for its budget.

Last year, the economy of Northern Ireland did not keep pace with the rest of the UK and it lagged far behind that of the Republic of Ireland, which was growing around four times faster. That just shows what a small independent country in the EU is capable of.

I firmly believe that investment in good public services and infrastructure is vital to the success of any economy. There is £140 million of new funding in recognition of the lack of opportunity for more “fundamental service reconfiguration”—a nifty wee phrase with which the Treasury and the Northern Ireland Office are attempting to circumvent the regular budgetary process. We cannot forget that that is in addition to the £333 million of funding that comes from the Government’s confidence and supply agreement with the Democratic Unionist party. Some of the money seems to be allocated effectively, with £100 million to support health transformation, £3 million for broadband and £200 million for capital spending on key infrastructure projects. I particularly welcome the £30 million to tackle poor mental health and severe deprivation. However, despite my jealousy at that extra investment, I would never countenance the SNP selling its soul to prop up a Government who do so much harm to our citizens and are hellbent on ripping us out of the EU, for which neither Scotland nor Northern Ireland voted, and the reasons behind the positive spending are more than a little suspect. In fact, many say that the extra funding is just a Brexit bung to buy off the DUP.

The extra revenue allocation falls outside the normal budgetary processes deliberately to ensure that Scotland and Wales are denied their rightful Barnett consequentials.

That raises huge questions of the Secretary of State for Scotland, who said unequivocally that he “was not going to agree to anything that could be construed as back-door funding to Northern Ireland”.

5.11 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): For another year, I rise with a degree of reluctance as we agree a budget that should be debated about 300 miles from here. I am sure that hon. Members across the House will agree that this situation is deeply regrettable. Devolution should be cherished, and its success is vital to the growth and prosperity of Northern Ireland. I believe unequivocally that this budget should not be voted on by politicians in this place representing constituencies in Scotland, Wales and England. Also, as others have said, this emergency legislation process affords ineffective scrutiny. I once again urge the Government to redouble their efforts to begin talks in earnest as soon as possible, so that they can be the effective arbiter required to bring an end to this impasse. If they cannot do that, they should bring in someone who can.
He has been written to this week, but he had not replied by the time that I stood up to speak, so does the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland know when the Secretary of State for Scotland was informed that the additional moneys would not be subject to the Barnett formula? Did he agree to that? Most importantly, did he even argue that Scotland should be entitled to its fair share of budgetary increases? If he did not, he must simply go.

Gavin Robinson: I know that the hon. Gentleman wants to make an elaborate political point, but he is not a churlish individual and will have heard this afternoon that we do not have devolved Ministers who are able to take account of financial pressures and make decisions accordingly. That is the rationale for the additional funds. Scotland is blessed with a functioning Government, and we wish we had one, but he should not try to extrapolate this proposal into some cheap point.

Gavin Newlands: I do not accept that I am making a cheap point, but I fully accept the hon. Gentleman’s central point. We would not be strong Members of Parliament for Scotland if we were not here to represent Scottish interests, and the Barnett formula is there for a reason.

The Secretary of State for Scotland should have used his position in Cabinet to stand up for Scotland and protect the Barnett formula, but he did not. If he did, the Scottish budget could have increased by £400 million. Moreover, if he had stood firm regarding the confidence and supply agreement in its entirety, Scotland would have had an extra £3 billion to mitigate this Government’s policies, to prepare for Brexit and to invest in infrastructure, but he either failed or did not bother. He has abdicated his responsibility to Scotland and, despite various promises that he would resign with regard to protecting Scotland interests vis-à-vis Brexit, he has bottled it each and every time.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making an excellent contribution. Does he agree that the Secretary of State for Scotland has promised to resign so many times that we have lost count? It is clear that the Secretary of State does not have the ability to have any effect in Cabinet and is becoming the boy who cried wolf.

Gavin Newlands: I could not agree more. The Secretary of State for Scotland’s promises to resign in defence of Scotland have become like white noise, which just highlights how Westminster does not work for Scotland. If the Scottish Secretary is actually arguing for us in Cabinet, he is not being listened to. The alternative is that he is not bothering at all, which is even more troubling. If ever there were proof that the Scottish Secretary is the Tory Cabinet’s voice in Scotland rather than Scotland’s voice in Cabinet, it is now.

The SNP believes that new talks should be established immediately to restore the Executive and the Assembly. However, with the UK Government rather distracted by internal Tory party infighting, I say again that an independent mediator could and should be brought in to speed up progress. It has been over two years since Northern Ireland had a functioning Assembly, which is far too long. The people of Northern Ireland deserve reassurances that they will have a responsive and functional devolved Assembly and Executive as they face Brexit—one of the biggest policy challenges that any of us will ever face. Nothing must be done that would undermine the Good Friday agreement. Therefore this, in my opinion, must be the last budget to be delivered in this manner. A paralysing political vacuum in Northern Ireland must not become the new normal state of affairs.

The UK Government, in this Parliament, to a degree are in chaos, but that absolutely cannot be used as an excuse for the lacklustre attempts since last February to re-establish Northern Ireland’s political institutions. The Government are consumed by their own civil war, but that should not distract from all our duties to steadfastly defend and protect the peace process. The SNP understands that decisions are badly needed to direct and fund public services in Northern Ireland, but the absence of political decision making, amidst ongoing austerity, has placed an intolerable burden on the health and education systems and on the Northern Ireland civil service and the people of Northern Ireland.

The broader instability caused by Brexit is a central reason why it is proving to be so difficult to restore the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland. The Executive and Assembly may have collapsed for various reasons, but Brexit and the threat of new borders or regulations have prolonged the dangerous political vacuum. The threat of new borders can, however, be removed. There would be no need for new economic borders in the Irish sea or across the island of Ireland if the whole UK pursues the SNP policy of staying in the European single market and customs union. It is important to remember that Northern Ireland, like Scotland, voted to remain in the EU by 56%.

Since the 2016 referendum, we in the SNP have engaged with businesses and civic leaders across Northern Ireland, all of whom have consistently made the point that the people of Northern Ireland voted to remain, and that their future economic prosperity will be put at risk by Brexit in any form. According to the Government’s own figures, a no-deal Brexit could end up resulting in a 12% GDP decline in the Northern Ireland economy. The UK Government’s analysis states that a no-deal Brexit “would affect the viability of many businesses across Northern Ireland”, and would therefore be tantamount to economic vandalism.

We in the SNP want to see Northern Ireland flourish. We want to see political and economic stability, partnered with strong, inclusive economic growth. We want to see that so that our neighbours—only a few miles across the Irish sea—will have effective public services, growing businesses and better livelihoods for their families. A prosperous Northern Ireland is in Scotland’s interests. A prosperous Northern Ireland is in the interests of England, Wales, the Irish Republic and our friends across the European Union.

We in the SNP fully support the Good Friday agreement and the maintenance of an invisible border that people from all over Ireland can freely cross, whether to visit family, to work, to study or to conduct business. Let us not be clear: we would never stand in the way of Northern Ireland achieving a special relationship with the European Union, if that was what was required. All that we ask is
that correct, and equitable, budget procedures are followed and that any increases in spending across the UK result in the rightful Barnett consequential for Scotland.

The final point that I want to make about the budget is on the Hart recommendations. I appreciate that those are sensitive topics and have been raised already, and I concede that the Secretary of State’s position has softened somewhat of late, but the Scottish Government have already announced that they are taking action in this area. The Secretary of State and the Minister will be aware of the victims’ group SAVIA—Survivors and Victims of Institutional Abuse. The group was pleased that the Scottish Government confirmed that they would be making advance payments to elderly and infirm victims and survivors prior to the passing of legislation, and is calling for that model to be adopted for Northern Ireland. So many of those who would have been entitled to compensation are now deceased, and SAVIA believes that the initiative shown by the SNP and the Scottish Government shows that where there is a will, there is a way. The group asks that the Secretary of State follows the leadership, courage and compassion shown by the Scottish Government to make compensation payments to elderly and infirm victims before it is too late.

In conclusion, the Government must give Northern Ireland, and restoring its Assembly, the attention that it requires. Delays in establishing effective talks can no longer be accepted. The institutions of the Good Friday agreement must be championed by all across this House, for the sake of the peace process and for the people of Northern Ireland. The people of Northern Ireland deserve better than this. However, if the Prime Minister’s promises about governing in all our interests are to ring true, she must respect the agreed devolved settlement for the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. The people of Scotland and Wales deserve better than this and, believe me, Madam Deputy Speaker: they are watching closely.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call Jim Shannon.

5.23 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I did not expect to be called first, Madam Deputy Speaker, so you have caught me off balance. [Interruption.] I am never lost for words.

I am pleased to be called in this debate and I want to start by thanking the Secretary of State for introducing this essential Bill today. It is important and it is why we are all present. I thank Members for the contributions that have been made up to now. We all know that the Bill contains parliamentary approval for in-year adjustments to Northern Ireland departmental budgets and for certain other bodies to incur expenditure and use resources for the remainder of the financial year ending 31 March 2019. Its importance has been highlighted by everyone who has made a contribution, including in interventions and by Northern Ireland’s representatives in this House. On behalf of the people of Northern Ireland, we are here to make that comment. The Bill further seeks approval for a vote on account of an amount equivalent to 70% of the 2018-19 allocation to allow those Departments and public bodies to continue to deliver public services for part of the 2019-20 financial year. This finance, what it sets out to do and what it does is so important.

We all understand how necessary these steps are to take. We have the information before us and I had a quick look through it earlier. I wonder whether the Minister summing up will be able to indicate what the responsibilities will be in respect of the fisheries enforcement vessel we have in Bangor and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs when we leave the EU on 29 March. On the Monday a week or so ago, I had the opportunity to meet the fisheries officers to discuss that. I said to them that that fisheries enforcement vessel does not seem to do very much. That seems to be the case, from the evidence I have. Will it be more active after 29 March? Will the resources be made available to ensure that it can enforce the fisheries rules that we will have for our seas at that time?

I do not want to be critical about Departments, but sometimes I wonder exactly what happens. I brought the matter of packaging to the attention of Ministers at the Department for Exiting the European Union last week. There is a responsibility here to the agri-food sector, and a number of businesses in my constituency depend on that. The packaging issue has not been addressed. For some reason, DAERA has not responded to the companies in my constituency. The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) is one of those who contacted me about this. I understand that this is a simple matter of addressing the packaging. DAERA has not done it and has referred the issue to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. It is like musical chairs; they are pushing it about as much as they can. They must get it done. That is the issue we need to get sorted out for our agri-food sector.

The explanatory notes state:

“This Bill is a minimal step to ensure that public services continue to be provided in Northern Ireland.”

Therein lies the issue I have: the people of Northern Ireland have had the bare minimum for too long. The acceptable level of governance has been emphasised by other Members and we simply are not getting it.

As for 70% of the moneys allocated to Departments being used for projects, I have to say that I have some concerns about delays on some of the things we are all waiting for. I am sure Members will not be surprised if I give them a list of what I am waiting for in my constituency. I could spend half an hour going over all the ones that need to be done, but I will just spend a few minutes highlighting the issues. The first thing we need is the Ballynahinch bypass—we are still waiting on it. All the papers are in order; everything is ready to go; the land has been acquired—but, guess what, the Department just cannot make that decision. Everybody in Ballynahinch wants to see the bypass in place. Even my colleagues and friends do. Why is that? It is because then I will not be bringing this issue up every time we have a parliamentary meeting, but that is by the bye. The point I am trying to make is that everything is in order for it to happen but it is not happening.

Secondly, we have a coastal erosion programme for the Ards peninsula. Again, the deliberations are done and the recommendations have been made. There are 96 coastal erosion locations to be addressed, but we have not got to the place we want to be in addressing that. Again, that highlights how we need to get the moneys through to where they need to be.
The problem with these minimal steps is that they are going to produce a minimal health service and minimal education for our children. The hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, referred to its ongoing inquiries on education and health. We will shortly be doing one, which we hope will be less complicated, on the benefits system, which the hon. Member for North Down and I wish to see addressed, too. There are lots of things happening that we need to address.

The DUP has taken action. The fact is that without the supply and confidence agreement, which boosted the budget by some £300 million, and the successful party representation to the Chancellor, which has secured an extra £140 million, Northern Ireland simply could not function. People talk about green cheese in this House all the time. The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) sees somebody getting something good and he wants it as well. They are unbelievable, they really are.

We need to take action to tackle the pressures in education and health. The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee is trying to address some of the important issues as and when it can and make recommendations, which we hope to see shortly. My hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) referred to special needs education. How important that issue is. It comes up in every inquiry, deputation and presentation that we get. I have people in my constituency saying almost every week that we need to address those issues. The highest levels of depression in Northern Ireland are among schoolchildren, some of them under the age of 10. There are levels of depression that were never aware of before, but we have them in our area and in our constituencies in Northern Ireland. We really need to address those critical issues.

The referrals are also part of the issue. I met the chair of the local primary schools less than a month ago. All those primary schools’ budgets are squeezed. They are really at crisis point, so we have to address the issues. Last week, I had the opportunity to speak to the principal of Movilla High School to catch up and find out what is happening there. Movilla High School needs some help. I sit on the board of governors of Gastrly College, which needs that new building. These things are coming across throughout the constituency.

The money would not have come without my colleagues having outlined the fact that frontline services are at breaking point. I am thankful for the funding that the DUP has secured, but we must be clear that even with the additional money, frontline services are struggling: A&E services are literally at capacity. We need ministerial intervention, and that is not happening at Stormont, so I ask again for something for which I have advocated consistently: a compulsory return to Stormont with no red lines, or the Secretary of State’s rolling up her sleeves and beginning direct rule procedures.

We have tried to address the issues relating to rare diseases in the Chamber. I am a member of the all-party group, along with other right hon. and hon. Members, and we have tried to address the issues with getting funding through, because rare diseases involve minimal numbers. We need to address those issues. On access to medicines, Orkambi is very important. Those with diseases and problems who need help will understand that access to drugs is important. 

A long time has passed and Sinn Féin’s intransigence is slowly killing hope and seeing people needlessly die on waiting lists throughout the Province. It is effecting professionals’ mental health as they try to cope in situations that have been described as war-zone situations in A&Es. We need to act on behalf not simply of patients but of the staff who are being asked to do the impossible. Minimal steps are not good enough for the elderly lady lying in a corridor in the Ulster Hospital in Dundonald, and neither are they good enough for the four-year-old about to start her schooling career in a school where the teachers are advised to ask parents—this has been said in the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee—for toilet paper and told by unions that they cannot run after-school clubs. Not only the principal of the school that I visited but the chair of the primary schools in my area have told me that if it was not for the parent-teacher association and the moneys that it raises every year, they could not afford to have the classroom assistant teaching in those schools. They could not afford to have the stationery if it was not for the good will of others who are helping out. These are the critical issues.

Of course I welcome the additional money for frontline services—£20 million in 2017-18 and £410 million in 2018-19—but it was a sticking plaster. That plaster has now come off, revealing a wound that needs dedicated, specialised attention but is not getting it. The DUP wants a return to devolution, because we believe that is the most democratic future for Northern Ireland, but we cannot afford to wait any longer.

I believe it is time to consider a new political process for Northern Ireland with all the parties at Stormont that want a devolved Administration, which Sinn Féin continues to thwart. It is time to consider a different and more direct approval process. If Sinn Féin does not want to participate, or wants to put down red lines to stop the political process, let us move forward with the parties that do wish to participate and form a Government who can look after the affairs of Northern Ireland. I believe that that would be a way forward; it might be different from what we have done in the past, but maybe it is time we did it now. Even if a party does not want to be part of the process, we should move forward, because we need regional government.

I will finish soon—as you will probably be glad to hear, Madam Deputy Speaker. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] I do not know why Members are saying that.

Minimal steps are not enough. That is what this debate is about: we are very pleased to have a budget approved, but we are also clear in what we are saying. I ask the Minister of State to take the appropriate steps towards direct rule, not because that is my first option or that of the DUP—we want a regional government in place that is accountable to the people—but because it is our only option to stop the wound seeping before we bleed out.

Please, Minister of State, hear our call. Yes, we need the Bill, but we need more than these minimal steps; we need decisive action. We need to start the process and
send a message to Sinn Féin: “If you won’t return to Stormont, fine, but decisions will be made in this place for the allocation and health of all people in Northern Ireland.” Nevertheless, I welcome the budget, and I welcome where we are today.

5.36 pm

**Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP):** General disappointment has been expressed that, for the third year now, expenditure in Northern Ireland is being approved through this unusual process in the House, with little or no scrutiny or knowledge of how the allocations to Departments have been decided. We do not know what arguments were made for giving 3.8%—or whatever it was—to health and 1.1% to education, while other Departments suffered an overall reduction and others’ budgets were kept static. We have had no opportunity to ask civil servants what cases were made or whether they were valid. As my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) pointed out, it is not that there is no mechanism for such scrutiny: it is simply that a choice was made not to use the mechanism that is available through this House.

Of course, this should all have been done at Stormont. During the budget process, its committees ought to have brought civil servants in, asked them what bids were being made and what arguments were being employed, and then made a judgment on the merits of each case. However, we are not in that position—not because parties in Northern Ireland do not want the opportunity of scrutiny at Stormont, but simply because they have been prevented from carrying it out.

Using the terms of the arrangements for setting up a Government in Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin has been able to prevent the coalition arrangement that was forced through in the Belfast agreement from being implemented. Because including the two main parties in the Executive is a compulsory imposition rather than a voluntary arrangement, if one of those parties throws a hissy fit and decides that it does not want to be in the Executive, everybody is kept out—not just from the Executive, but from Stormont and from all the roles and responsibilities that they were elected for and would normally be entitled to carry out.

The Secretary of State quite rightly says that this process should be done at Stormont, but she knows that it cannot be done there. Like the shadow Secretary of State, I do not place the blame totally at the door of the Secretary of State. She has to operate within the rules, and the rules state that if one party decides to veto, not a great deal can be done about it. For reasons that I will explain in a moment or two, no powers of persuasion will persuade Sinn Féin to go into Stormont at this particular time; they have made that quite clear. Sinn Féin have thrown up every barrier. Whatever magic wand the Secretary of State might wave, she is not going to persuade them otherwise. However, there is one way in which she could put pressure on them, which is by making it quite clear to them that, through their inaction, the very thing that they do not want to happen—that is, rule by London—will happen, unless they are prepared to accept their responsibilities in Northern Ireland.

We find it difficult to understand why there has not been a willingness to take Sinn Féin on in that way, but I suspect that it is because of the advice given by the Northern Ireland Office, known colloquially among Unionists in Northern Ireland as the nest of vipers. The position of the Northern Ireland Office seems to be, “Don’t annoy Sinn Féin and don’t annoy the Irish Government.” I suspect that a large part of the reason why we have not moved to greater scrutiny and greater decision making by Ministers here is the advice of the Northern Ireland Office: “Don’t rock the boat.” But if we don’t rock the boat, we are going to stay on the path that we are on at present, which does not provide scrutiny of the most important issue for politicians—the expenditure of resources for the benefit of the community.

Not only do we not have scrutiny of the overall budget allocation, we do not even have scrutiny of the efficiency of current spending. Looking through the various headings for expenditure last year, or through the proposed 70% expenditure for next year, we can see many areas where there is great concern about the way in which money is spent. I will pick out just a few. Take, for example, the Department for the Economy. We have been trying to increase connectivity in Northern Ireland, yet despite all the evidence that supporting access to air services to other parts of the world helps economic growth, we have found an unwillingness to spend money in that area. One of the reasons that the Department has given is, “We don’t have any direction from a Minister. It’s not a decision that the civil service can make.” My hon. Friend the Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) has lobbied hard on this issue because Belfast international airport is in his constituency and there could be huge opportunities there.

Petroleum licensing is another example. There are huge opportunities in Northern Ireland but we cannot even get consultation on licences that could create hundreds of jobs in mining and oil exploration in rural areas in the west of the Province, where high-paid jobs are hard to come by. Money for broadband has been reprofiled because, despite the fact that £150 million was made available, decisions have not been made about spending that money. Hopefully, with the start of the money that has been allocated this year, we will find that the programme will be accelerated over the next number of years.

We allocate money to Tourism Ireland, and many people query whether that money is used effectively. When people travel into Belfast international airport, what hits them in the face when they come off the plane? An advert to send tourists who arrive at that airport down to Dublin—and our money pays for it. Yet there is no scrutiny of whether that is an effective way of spending public money to promote Northern Ireland.

I could go on with lots of other examples, but that is the kind of vacuum we are left with because of the lack of scrutiny not just of the general allocations of money across Departments but of the specific allocations within Departments.

**Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con):** As members of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, we hear at first hand, nearly every week now, about how the lack of an Assembly and an Executive is affecting ordinary people, whether it is money not being spent on healthcare, schools where parents are having to bring in toilet rolls, or the Police Service of Northern Ireland not knowing whether it can pay its staff at the end of the month. This is impacting the real lives of real people.
Sammy Wilson: The hon. Lady mentioned education. In the year for which we are now finalising the accounts, additional money was secured for education. That money was meant to go to frontline services in education—that is, the classrooms—but the Department of Education decided to allocate it to finance the education authority, which was running a deficit, and was leaning on schools that were running a deficit in their budgets. That is the kind of thing that would never have been allowed to happen if we had a functioning Assembly and a Minister rather than civil servants making these decisions. It is not just about the total amount of money that is allocated; we also have to be looking at how effectively that money is spent, and we do not have the means for doing that. If it cannot be done in Northern Ireland, then there should be means for doing it here.

The Secretary of State gave an explanation why she had allocated 70% of the expenditure to Departments for next year as opposed to the usual 45%—because there might be heavier expenditure at the beginning of the year than at the end of the year, and she therefore wanted to make sure that Departments did not run out of money. Given that most of the revenue expenditure has to be spread over the year because a lot of it goes on salaries, I do not think that is a credible explanation. I think the Secretary of State knows full well that we will not have an Assembly up and running by June, because she knows what the problem is. She has talked to Sinn Féin and she knows the attitude of Sinn Féin. I suspect that 70% has been allocated so that she has the flexibility maybe even to bring the final budget to this House in September or October rather than be forced to bring it early in June because there is no Assembly up and running.

That brings me to one of the reasons why I believe we are having to do this again this year. Many people have said that it is about Brexit, or the fact that Sinn Féin cannot get agreement with the DUP about certain matters like an Irish language Act. Having said that, I do not know how anyone justifies tens of millions of pounds of expenditure on an Irish language Act at a time when we have the pressure on budgets that we have now. Certainly, it should not be a priority for expenditure or getting Stormont up and running again.

I welcome the additional money. For the information of the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), this is not a result of the Barnett formula not being properly applied. The Barnett formula is properly applied. Barnett formula allocations for Scotland and Northern Ireland are based on the expenditure decided for Departments in England. If there is an uplift in areas of spending in those Departments, it also comes to Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

This is money over and above the Barnett formula. Scotland has experienced that on occasions, but we did not complain about it. It is wrong to suggest that this is a result of the Barnett formula not being properly applied. Some of the changes to the allocations that we are authorising for 2018-19 are a result of Barnett formula applications during the year, with additional money put into the budget since we discussed it last June having to be spent by Departments.

This is a challenging budget. The real reason why Sinn Féin are not prepared to enter the Assembly is that they do not have the political courage to make the decisions that a budget of this nature would require them to make. There is plenty of evidence for that. First, why did the Assembly collapse? Despite what people say about the renewable heat scheme and everything else, the Assembly would have collapsed anyhow, because the then Finance Minister had not even presented a budget to the Assembly. If it had not been presented to the Assembly, the Government would have collapsed because there would have been no money to spend. Why did he not present a budget two and a half years ago? Because he knew that there were hard decisions to be made, and he was not prepared to make them. His party was not prepared to go through the Lobby to back those decisions because it was looking over its shoulder at People Before Profit, which had taken votes off it in its heartlands in West Belfast and Londonderry.

If that was the problem then, it is still the problem today. Sinn Féin do not want to have to put their hand on the tiller and guide Northern Ireland through the difficulties of budget considerations. Governments here and in Scotland and Wales have to do that, as indeed do Governments in the Irish Republic. Sinn Féin would rather strut around the Irish Republic telling people that if they vote for Sinn Féin, the Government down there will not have to impose austerity measures. Of course, the one reason why the new SDLP claim is by Sinn Féin having to make decisions about budgets in Northern Ireland, but they do not want to do that.

That means that we have not been able to look at new areas of expenditure, and that is significant. Members have talked today about new pressures. For example, there is greater pressure on school budgets because of rising populations and a change in the distribution of populations, which sometimes expand and sometimes decline. There are greater pressures on mental health, which my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about. This budget reflects the decisions and priorities of the Executive of more than three years ago. Indeed, if we look at the heads of spending for 2018-19 and 2019-20, we see that it is a cut and paste. There are no new things, because that is not possible.

We pass legislation here to allow top civil servants and permanent secretaries to take decisions that could redirect some spending. But civil servants—wrongly, I think—have refused to use those powers on many occasions. It is frustrating that they have not been prepared to make decisions on even simple things, because they fear that if something goes wrong, they will be called before the Northern Ireland Audit Office or finish up on the front page of the Belfast Telegraph. It is not a great way of doing it, but at least some of these decisions should be made by civil servants.

We have a lack of scrutiny of the overall budget and of the detail of the budget, and we have no mechanism for deciding new priorities, all of which we are going to need in a dynamic economy. That is why this process is so damaging to Northern Ireland. It is damaging politically because it allows people simply to opt out of the political process. They entered that process, stood for election and got elected, but then they do not do their job.

I know there will be debates about how to do this, but I think one of the ways of pushing into doing their job properly those who are holding back our ability to do the job—we are doing it, and doing it very poorly, here today—is to make it quite clear that the stark choice is
either to have local rule or to have rule from London. I believe that would be a huge embarrassment to Sinn Féin. It has been able to avoid that embarrassment because the Government here have refused to make such a decision.

We want to see devolution and we want people to be pressurised into going back into Stormont, however difficult that may be. Let me just say to the House that it is difficult. Look at the difficulties the Government have with the disparate views they have on their own Buck Benches in this place. It is an indication of the skill that was used by politicians in Northern Ireland that, for many years, we ran a coalition that included people who would very happily sit on the Government Benches as well as people who might be uncomfortable sitting beside the Leader of the Opposition on the Opposition Benches because they are even to the left of him. We ran a coalition on that basis, but it has now collapsed, and following its collapse, this is an inadequate way of doing business for Northern Ireland.

5.57 pm

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson). I am afraid, as far as the Northern Ireland Office is concerned, I will continue on the issue of the lack of transparency and scrutiny. At the nub of this—it is felt across the House and I know it is shared in Northern Ireland—is the fact that these are important matters that need to be dissected and examined, but the level of scrutiny we are able to subject them to will be minimal indeed.

I want to begin with the political outlook. Unfortunately, we are in the position we face today only because we do not have a devolved Government in Stormont, and we have now been in this limbo for two years and several months. Part of the reason why we continue to be in this limbo is that Sinn Féin, which brought the Stormont institutions down by the resignation of the then Deputy First Minister, has for some considerable time established a series of red lines in relation to going back into government.

However, as indicated by the Opposition spokesperson on Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd), Sinn Féin, in the words of its leader, Michelle O’Neill, has now copper-fastened that approach. I have to say that part of the reason why it has copper-fastened that approach is that the lack of decisive action from the Government in this place in confronting its previous intransigence has only emboldened it to be more intransigent.

Not only do those in Sinn Féin say, “Well, we’ve gotten away with two years of saying we’re not going back into government until we have certain unreasonable demands met, and we must have them met, pocketed and banked before we go in”—they have got away with that, and we have simply continued this limbo period—but they have now established yet further red lines in relation to even going in to talk about how we get the Government up and running. I am afraid that a considerable amount of blame can be landed on the desk of the Northern Ireland Office for not confronting the Sinn Féin approach.

We are in a situation that is neither fish nor fowl, with neither direct rule nor local rule, as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim put it. Our constituents are talking about education, health and a whole series of local projects that could be delivered and asking what we are doing to try to help deliver them. Our answer is that we can do very little and that we want to get Stormont up and running. I know colleagues of mine met a series of principals in the education sector just a few weeks ago, and the principals were unanimous in their demand that something had to be done to rescue their sector from an impending crisis, as we hear in the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee week after week. Yet my colleagues had to say, “We’re ready to enter Stormont today, tomorrow or next week, but unfortunately others are not.”

We find ourselves in this bind, without either direct rule or devolved government. We are stumbling into a crisis week by week, month by month. Although there are a number of local issues, people are also demanding action on broad, encompassing issues. I know that the Secretary of State made it clear that certain matters of departmental spend were not her prerogative or that of the Minister of State, and I understand that, but nevertheless we are left in a bind with something that cannot deliver and that is inadequate in what it does deliver.

Many parts of Northern Ireland are teetering on the cusp between the crisis that is ahead of us and a remarkable breakthrough. My hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is not in his place at the moment, talked about his constituency. For the first time in 70 years, the Open golf tournament will return to my constituency and the Royal Portrush golf club. There will be almost 200,000 visitors to that tournament, 30% from outside Northern Ireland and the Republic. A considerable number of that 30% will be high-net-worth individuals.

I have been pressing Invest Northern Ireland to ensure that when those people arrive, we do what we can to maximise any inward investment potential. At this point, I pay tribute to the outgoing chief executive of Invest Northern Ireland, Mr Alistair Hamilton. He has spent 10 years in his role and has performed a manful, dutiful task over and above what would have been expected of someone in his position. So much more could be achieved in the next few months. The Open golf tournament takes place in July, and I would hope that Invest Northern Ireland would be campaigning and pressing inward investment buttons for opportunities that could be opened up as a result of it.

I have referred in this House to the private sector Heathrow logistics hub process, which is taking a further step forward. If it is a successful operation in the part of the United Kingdom that is Northern Ireland, it will deliver thousands of jobs. Here we are on the cusp of a breakthrough, with a combination of things that could deliver. Others have mentioned connectivity, and I think of the potential at all of our airports. Londonderry airport can expand, and we have a public service obligation that could help to deliver additional routes. That can only happen if we have ministerial direction and ministerial cover to ensure that all the possibilities are taken advantage of. We have other rail routes and road routes. All can help to deliver job infrastructure developments, which are there now but cannot be fully developed because of the lack of a devolved Government.

As I said, there are two overarching sectors that pervade the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee week on week—education and health. We hear the messages of complaint. We hear the dire consequences that are
ahead of us. I do not want to unduly be a prophet of
gloom, but the health sector came through the current
winter crises and pressures because of the relatively mild
winter. It came through it in a poor state, but not in a
crisis. Next winter, however, if emphatic action is not
taken either at Stormont or here, I am absolutely certain
that we will not come through unscathed in the way
that we have in the winter that is hopefully just ending.
The overall Bengoa-style review is required to give
emphasis and impetus to an overarching exchange and
development of our health service to meet the demands
of the 21st century. Without taking that into account,
we are facing an impending crisis in the health sector.

Every one of us, every week, hears from schools,
principals and vice-principals about the escalating
catastrophe that is the education sector. That will worsen
and deepen in the coming weeks and months unless we
have ministerial involvement either in this place or in
Stormont. Unfortunately, to date, Sinn Féin’s feet have
not been held to the fire. We want to get a devolved
Government back up and running. We know and accept
that the process for that devolved government is not ideal.
It is not our No. 1 priority in terms of what we
would like to see, but it is the only show in town, so
either we deliver a mechanism through Stormont or
moves will have to be made here in the Westminster
Parliament. One thing is for sure: we cannot and we
must not—the people will not allow us—allow the position
that currently pertains to go on for very much longer.

6.7 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): We have heard
a wide range of speeches on the Bill, but they have a
similar theme. Before entering this House, I was a
manager in the NHS in England. I have been a school
governor and a non-executive director. I have served on
finance committees, audit committees, and, since joining
this place, I have been a member of the Public Accounts
Committee. Like many people in this place, I take
seriously the issue of spending taxpayers’ money. I
believe it warrants scrutiny, analysis, challenge and,
critically, accountability. As has been noted in all the
speeches we have heard this afternoon, we should not
be discussing the Bill, but, as we are, we should be doing
it properly, and we cannot.

Paul Masterton: The hon. Lady mentions her role on
the Public Accounts Committee. Does she think that,
for as long as Stormont continues to not sit, there
would be any merit in having the reports of the Northern
Ireland Audit Office reviewed by the Public Accounts
Committee?

Karin Smyth: I understand that the reports of the
Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland
are currently not being scrutinised in the way that we
would expect here. If the Public Accounts Committee
was to undertake that role, it would be a very serious
change to constitutional arrangements. The actuality
discussed by the Chair of Northern Ireland Affairs
Committee and others is that there needs to be some
sort of process. I am not sure whether this is the right
process, but I agree that there needs to be some sort of
process for the reports already coming out of Northern
Ireland that are highlighting some serious problems.

I make no judgment about the work of the Northern
Ireland Office, the civil servants in Northern Ireland
and the many public servants trying to continue to
deliver services, but the lack of scrutiny and analysis of
that money, and our incapacity to challenge, means that
that huge area of spend, involving UK taxpayers’ money,
is receiving less attention than school budgets get when
we audit them. We know—this has been reinforced—that
there are huge problems under the headings of this
debate. As my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale
(Tony Lloyd) said, the Opposition want the Department
to make progress on the Hart inquiry, victims’ and
survivors’ pensions, and the medical school at Ulster
University. I recently visited the team behind the project
to progress the medical school in Derry/Londonderry.
The scale of the work to date, and their ambition for
their city and region, is to be commended, and the
Secretary of State must find a way to support them. We
have the ridiculous situation in which civil servants
can support the business case but not agree the funding,
because that is beyond their powers and would be
considered a reallocation.

Why is a medical school important? The Government
are proud of their announcement of new medical schools
in England. The areas chosen need those schools because
we need the recruits. As the chief executive of Health
Education England said when the announcement was
made—MPs in those areas know this—“studies show that
doctors tend to stay in the areas where they
train so it means more doctors for the region to deliver high-quality
care.”

In Northern Ireland, the locum bill is more than
£80 million per annum and rising—an increase, according
to the Bengoa report, of more than 78% in five years. It
is clear that Northern Ireland needs to be training more
of its own doctors and other clinical staff. It also needs
to pay them properly, but the rates of pay of those staff
are falling behind those in the rest of the UK.

Mr Gregory Campbell: I commend the hon. Lady for
raising the issue of the medical school. Does she agree
that there is an urgent need to develop not only the
medical school in Londonderry but the veterinary school
in Coleraine for precisely the same reasons, albeit in a
different sector?

Karin Smyth: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for
making that point. I have not been able to visit that
project, but I would very much like to. I agree that
investing, training and keeping people local is an important
and valuable symbol.

I recently visited the stunning new Omagh Hospital
and Primary Care Complex, which is part of the Western
Health and Social Care Trust. It is doing great work
across the area to manage the challenges of rising
demand and costs, which all health systems face. Its top
issues of concern are the availability of medical staff
and the huge amount of money being spent on locums.
To ensure cover across Northern Ireland, precious resource
is being spread far too thinly. I ask the Minister to tell
us whether the Government will direct the Ministry of
Justice to support the Lord Chief Justice’s call for
funding, and whether he will progress the medical school,
which is time-critical.

Some 46% of the Northern Ireland budget is for
healthcare, and the history of reports and recommendations
is decades-long. Most recently, Professor Bengoa’s report
referred the renowned academic Professor John Appleby, who found that Northern Ireland’s spending is roughly 11.5% higher than in England, but there is roughly an 11.6% higher level of need. The service is broadly funded as well as the rest of the UK, but there are significant disparities. In particular, mental health need is recognised to be about 44% higher than in England, but per capita spending is sometimes 10% to 30% lower. That led to the conclusion that the problem is not the level of funding but how it is being used to deliver services. Today, we are no further forward in addressing that problem. Spending on the acute sector continues to grow. Having a large number of small buildings is expensive and, most importantly, is not fit for the high quality, 21st century care that we should all be expecting across the United Kingdom.

The Bengoa report opens with a quote from the former chief medical officer, Sir Liam Donaldson:

“A proportion of poor quality, unsafe care occurs because local hospital facilities in some parts of Northern Ireland cannot provide the level and standards of care required to meet patients’ needs 24 hours a day”. What action are the Government taking to address that problem?

The Minister of State and I share a health geography in the south-west. His local hospital is undergoing difficult and controversial changes. He understands the safety issues and the need to make difficult choices about changes to small hospitals and the transformation to different models of care and to greater specialisation at large acute trusts. In his remarks, he needs to reassure our constituents here in England, about quality of care. He needs to assure us today that the extra money for health is not just covering continuing inefficiencies and deficits, but is doing something to improve services and, above all, that patient safety is paramount.

Previous allocations as part of the confidence and supply money are of course welcomed by people in Northern Ireland, but one-off payments are no way to transform a health system. I recently heard about a preventive cardiology pilot working upstream with GPs. Money for successive years is not known and the trust is expected to continue funding it as part of its mainstream budget. It is not possible to transform healthcare to meet demands in the 21st century on one-off moneys, and it is a very poor use of taxpayers’ money as well as of the staff time spent proposing and developing new bids.

The next greatest area of spending is education, which has dominated today’s debate. As mentioned, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee has had an informative session on education spending in the last few weeks, and last week again discussed the much reported recommendations to improve education outcomes in Northern Ireland. Sir Robert Salisbury, who gave evidence last week and reported in 2013, told us six years ago that the system was living beyond its means, and he gave the example of the six post-primary schools in Omagh, which has a similar population to his native Nottinghamshire, which has two.

The Education Authority, which has been referenced this afternoon, has a £90 million deficit largely because of special educational needs spending, which has also been addressed this afternoon. Schools are managing very high levels of mental ill health and, sadly, of suicide and self-harm among children, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) highlighted. As I mentioned earlier, the poor funding of mental health services as part of the overall health budget is exacerbating the problem.

There is a large deficit in schools, as the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) just said, and the budget is an escalating catastrophe. There are also high levels of achievement, as referenced in the Select Committee last week, and what is described as a long tail of underachievement. There are an estimated 60,000 to 70,000 empty desks in Northern Ireland, two teacher training colleges and two separate statutory planning authorities. The Integrated Education Fund, which I have visited recently, has called the system divided and costly.

I hope that the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee report will shine more light on education spending, but many of the calls have been for a Bengoa-type review. As noted, however, we already have a Bengoa review of health, and without the political oversight and will, it will not make the change. The end of the Committee’s session finished on a depressing note, as the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People reported that there needed to be an honest conversation about the allocation of funding within the Department of Education but that there was no appetite for that.

We in the Labour party continue to support the need for integrated education as part of the long-term route to reconciliation in Northern Ireland, and I know that the Integrated Education Fund hopes to visit here in the summer to share with Members the work it does and the challenges faced. It would be good to see some of its thoughts put to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in its final report.

Beneath the figures that we are rushing through tonight—without proper process and security—lies the future of Northern Ireland’s children’s hopes, dreams and aspirations and of the people needing treatment and care from the NHS who now find themselves on record length and totally unacceptable waiting lists. We will of course support the budget tonight, so that public services can continue, but the people of Northern Ireland deserve much better than this.

6.19 pm

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): Let me pick up from where my opposite number, the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), left off and say that I am pleased to hear—from, I think, everyone—that there is limited opposition to the Bill and that Members are willing to support it on a cross-party basis. That is incredibly welcome. This is perhaps an unusual example of cross-party unanimity and consensus; there have been some pretty stroppy debates in the last couple of weeks on a variety of subjects. It is lovely to be here on a day when agreement is breaking out across different parts of the House.

However, I do not want to overstate that degree of cross-party consensus and agreement because what was also widely shared was a sense of frustration. There was frustration at the lack of a Stormont Executive—we heard that from pretty much every speaker this afternoon—and inevitably, because it matches that lack of a Stormont Executive, frustration at the limits of the Bill. As we have heard repeatedly, the Bill is there to keep the
[John Penrose]

wheels turning in Northern Ireland, but not to bring about much-needed reforms, because those reforms require a functioning Stormont Executive. We have also heard repeatedly a litany of things that are either not being done and need to be done, or are not being done as efficiently as they could be, simply because there is not the political air cover in Stormont that would enable much-needed decisions to be made to change what is happening.

I echo many Members—including the Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison)—in saying that that is no criticism of the civil servants in either the Northern Ireland civil service or the Northern Ireland Office. They are honour bound to make decisions based on the last set of policy decisions available to them, some of which are two or three years old. They must try to draw a line between those policy decisions and remain true to them.

Vernon Coaker: May I repeat what I said earlier? I agree with what the Minister is saying and this is not meant to be critical. I accept that, given the lack of a devolved Administration in Northern Ireland, we cannot scrutinise the decisions of civil servants. May I, however, ask the Minister to reflect again on the fact that changes are being made in this budget on the basis of the advice of civil servants? While we may not want to scrutinise or criticise those decisions, no information is available to the House about why the changes should be made. Will he take on board what the Secretary of State has said and look again at what information is provided to the House so that we can base our decisions on more information than we have now?

John Penrose: I do take that on board, especially because I think that the hon. Gentleman was one of the last Ministers who had to deal with the issue of direct rule.

Vernon Coaker: No, I was not.

John Penrose: So I am giving the hon. Gentleman responsibilities that he never had to bear. Let me also mention to him that a Command Paper is currently available in the Library which gives a very detailed breakdown—it is well over an inch thick—of the way in which money has been spent in Northern Ireland during the financial year that is about to end. There is a huge amount of detail, but it is backward-looking. While it is helpful and, I am sure, welcome to all Members to ensure some degree of accountability, I think that all of us, including the Secretary of State, have agreed that we all hanker after a better process than this, but also that the fundamental and central problem is the lack of a functioning Executive in Stormont.

I was delighted to hear the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd), clearly say that he did not think direct rule is justified at this stage. He is also right to say that, because of that and because of the shortcomings we have all been enunciating, there is a tariff for political failure at Stormont: I think that was the phrase he used. The Chairman of the Committee quoted a reference to the “slow decay and stagnation” that is happening in Northern Ireland politics as a result, but rightly levelled the balance a little by referring to the restoration talks efforts made by my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister, and—again, rightly—was positive and full in his praise of both the Northern Ireland civil service and the NIO, and their unceasing efforts to do a professional job in an extremely difficult and increasingly challenging political environment.

Sir Mike Penning: Can I, in all fairness, challenge the Minister on the way he congratulated the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) in relation to direct rule? If direct rule is not the answer today, when will it be and, if it is not the answer soon, why?

John Penrose: A number of Members have said today that they would regard it as a last resort. I agree because we have to be incredibly careful about what we wish for here. We have to be extremely cautious about the notion of starting to take the drug of direct rule because it very swiftly leads to a very difficult and very precarious political position. I say to my right hon. Friend that there is a process laid out in primary legislation passed by this House—the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018—that says we have, first, five months and then, potentially renewable, a further five months in which to find a consensus and get an Executive re-established at Stormont. At that point, to answer his point about “If not now, when?” there are statutory obligations on the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland that will require decisions to be made at those various different waypoints, but it is extremely dangerous and extremely difficult for us all to prejudge, or indeed to wish that those talks, stuttering though they are, but attempted though they definitely are, should not be given enough time to come to a sensible conclusion. I think everybody has been clear that that is what we want them to do; we want them to be successful if they possibly can be.

The SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), was of the same mind. He spoke about a paralysing political stalemate in Stormont that must not become the new normal, and I agree.

Lady Hermon: I am sure I am not the only one who blinked and drew breath when I heard the Minister use the words “the drug of direct rule.” Perhaps I misheard him, but I will give him the opportunity to pick a more appropriate noun to describe direct rule.

John Penrose: It was certainly not my intention to cause the hon. Lady to draw breath. The point I was trying to make is that direct rule is potentially extremely dangerous and can lead to a very difficult political situation if we are not all collectively very careful. It is not a step to be taken lightly, simply or frivolously at all.

Tony Lloyd: In agreeing with the Minister, it is probably worth pointing out that the last period of direct rule lasted five years. This was the total antithesis of the ambitions of the devolved Administration.

John Penrose: I strongly agree and I think there has been pretty much unanimous agreement across the House during this debate about that point.
Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Essentially, what the House understood by the Minister’s first remark and his reformulation is that short-term temptations can lead to situations that are adverse and undesirable.

John Penrose: Indeed.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) had a long list of local projects that are not happening and that he thinks could and should happen were there to be proper government led in Stormont, and so did the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson); he had a list of all sorts of missed opportunities—everything from mining to tourism was mentioned. Both of them had some interesting suggestions, which I will take away rather than react to now, about how we might perhaps exert more pressure through potentially changing rules in Stormont. I will treat them with the care with which they were offered, I am sure.

The hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) was passionate in saying that Northern Ireland is on the cusp of a breakthrough—the economic performance and indeed the social cohesion in Northern Ireland are out-of-sight better than 10 or 20 years ago—but that it is being frustrated and that further progress could be made, but we are caught, I think he said that the governance of Northern Ireland is neither fish nor fowl—it is neither London nor local—and should this be solved, that would make a huge difference.

My opposite number, the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), spent some time talking about important issues to do with public services—health transformation budgets, for example—and how that money could be used to make some of the changes, because they were already agreed in policy before the Stormont Executive changed. But she was also right to point out, as others have done, that the amount of transformation that can be done is limited by the political constraints that everybody here has been describing.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): On the issue of health transformation, the permanent secretary at the Department of Health has made it clear that £100 million went into health transformation funding last year and another £100 million will go in this year as a direct result of confidence and supply money. He has welcomed this greatly, because it gives us an opportunity to roll out multidisciplinary teams and other things that can actually save money. These are not insignificant amounts of money. They are substantial amounts that are going to transform the health service as a result of the confidence and supply deal.

John Penrose: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. There is a significant transformation going on, and a significant amount of funds is going in to let that transformation happen, but it is also true to say that more transformation would be possible if there were political leadership as well. The civil service is limited not so much by the money at the moment; it is about the ability to take fresh policy decisions that would allow further progress to be made. That is the frustration under which we are all labouring during this Second Reading debate. On that basis, I plan to let us move on to consider the remaining stages of the Bill. I am delighted that there is cross-party consensus that it should proceed.

Karin Smyth: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. In my remarks, I specifically asked, given the progress that the Government made on the Lord Chief Justice’s proposals, whether the Minister would give us an answer on progress towards having a medical school as part of Ulster University. The project is not only time critical but critical to the future provision of training places for doctors, particularly, in Northern Ireland, which would help to reduce the locum bill. We would be grateful for the Minister’s comments on that.

John Penrose: I shall respond swiftly, as I do not want to hold up the rest of the process. The hon. Lady is right to say that she asked that specific question. Let me make two comments in response. First, the judicial changes are not a Westminster Government decision. They are taken, rightly, by independent judiciary in Northern Ireland. Secondly, her question on the medical school needs to be addressed as part of the city deal discussions that are currently getting under way, and I would be happy to discuss that with local people and, if necessary, with her as well. With that, I propose to do something unusual for a politician: stop talking and sit down.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Committee of the whole House (Order, this day).
Northern Ireland Budget (Anticipation and Adjustments) (No. 2) Bill
Considered in Committee (Order, this day)

[DAME ELEANOR LAING in the Chair]

6.34 pm

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing): I must inform the Committee that the Chairman of Ways and Means has selected amendment 2, tabled by the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). He has not selected the new clause tabled by the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), and he has not selected amendment 1, tabled by the hon. Member for Walthamstow. It will, however, be in order on this occasion to refer to the subject matter of new clause 1 and amendment 1, which have not been selected.

Clause 1

ISSUE OF SUM OUT OF THE CONSOLIDATED FUND FOR THE YEAR ENDING 31 MARCH 2019 AND APPROPRIATION OF THAT SUM

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The First Deputy Chairman: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Clauses 2 to 9 stand part.

Amendment 2, in schedule 2, page 13, line 7, after ‘offences’ insert—

‘except where such future prosecutions involve alleged offences under sections 58 and 59 of the Offences against the Person Act 1861’.

Schedules 1 to 4 be schedules to the Bill.

Karen Bradley: It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship in this Committee, Dame Eleanor. As these matters were debated at length on Second Reading, I do not propose to detain the Committee any further.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to speak to amendment 2, which I tabled with my hon. Friend the Members for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield), for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) and for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield). We recognise that this legislation has been brought to the House at short notice, but we want to put the Secretary of State on notice that the concerns raised in the amendments will endure in every piece of legislation until the issues are resolved, because they speak to one of the first concerns that any Member of Parliament should have: the human rights of the people whom we represent. Amendment 2 seeks to recognise that this Government cannot pick and choose their responsibilities. On the one hand, they take full responsibility for expenditure in Northern Ireland but, on the other hand, they ignore human rights abuses and the suffering that they are causing to UK citizens.

The Bill authorises departmental expenditure to allow the continued delivery of public services in Northern Ireland in the absence of an Executive and the consequent inability of the Northern Ireland Assembly to pass legislation to provide the same rules. That Assembly has not sat for over two years, which is why this House passed emergency legislation last November. Section 4 of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018 makes it clear that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is responsible for the guidelines relating to human rights in Northern Ireland. However, amendment 2 relates to the fact that she has failed to take any meaningful action to uphold that obligation and, indeed, has sought to deny it.

In a written ministerial statement on 30 January 2019, the Secretary of State said that “the current absence of devolved Government in Northern Ireland should not dislodge the principle that it is for the devolved Administration to both legislate on, and ensure compliance with, human rights obligations in relation to such devolved matters.”—[Official Report, 30 January 2019; Vol. 653, c. 40WS.]

However, article 27 of the Vienna convention states: “A party may not invoke the provisions of its internal law as justification for its failure to perform a treaty.”

In layman’s terms, that simply means that we cannot ignore our human rights responsibilities to the people of Northern Ireland and use devolution as a cover for doing so.

Stella Creasy: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend, who is a co-sponsor of amendment 2. That speaks to a concern that is shared by many, which is the picking and choosing for political expediency of what human rights means and what action the Government will take. However, we are not the only people to have identified that. Amendment 2 relates to the prosecution of people under sections 58 and 59 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861, and other August bodies have recognised the problems created by the Government’s approach to human rights.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): We have heard from across the House today that a unified approach is the proper answer in Northern Ireland, but that cannot be achieved at this stage. However, when we asked for transparency around finance, we were unable to get it. With human rights, that obligation rests on each of us as an individual, and particularly on the Secretary of State, and it is not restricted by borders. It is a responsibility wherever we see a human rights abuse.

Stella Creasy: “Delegation of government powers did not ‘negate the direct responsibility of the State party’s national or federal Government to fulfil its obligations to all women within its jurisdiction’. Thus, the United Kingdom cannot invoke its internal arrangements (the Belfast Agreement) to justify its failure to revise the laws of Northern Ireland that violate the Convention.”

The laws that violate that convention were written in this place, because the 1861 Act was written by the United Kingdom. It was written here, but it still has effect in Northern Ireland. It is the reason why, to this day, a woman who is raped in Northern Ireland and seeks a termination as a result would face a longer
I think I am right in saying that the situation in relation to the abortion legislation in Northern Ireland in the cases of rape, incest and fatal foetal abnormality was described as “deeply unsatisfactory”. When Supreme Court judges describe such things as “deeply unsatisfactory”, this country will have to legislate at some stage to comply with that.

**Stella Creasy:** I thank the hon. Lady. I am only disappointed because I was sort of hoping for a proposal; but I completely agree with the point that she makes. Indeed, she prefigures something that I shall come on to. We are spending money because of our failure to tackle those human rights issues—money that could be going into public services in Northern Ireland, but instead will be spent upholding the situation that she describes. I want to come on to that, and what that practically means for the Secretary of State.

We know that cases are currently going through the courts as a direct result of this situation. In 2013, the mother of a 15-year-old was prosecuted under the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 for procuring abortion pills for her under-age daughter. The mother was prosecuted following the appointment with her daughter and a GP. That decision is now being judicially reviewed, so there is a live case, which the UK Government will spend money to defend as a result of the provisions of the Bill before us.

Today, we know that the UK Government have been formally notified that A and B, a mother and daughter from Northern Ireland, are taking their battle to the European Court of Human Rights. They are challenging the refusal to allow women from Northern Ireland access to abortion services free of charge in England and have issued legal proceedings against the English Health Secretary. Six years ago, they were forced to raise £900 to travel from Northern Ireland to Manchester in order for B to be treated at a private clinic. I absolutely share the sentiments of my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) about the importance of value for money within our politics. On the public purse, the crucial thing in this case is that an offer was made to settle with the Government. There was an offer not to proceed with this kind of spending, but the Government have refused. They have ignored the requests to settle this case, even though the law has subsequently changed. That means that public money that could be going on public services in Northern Ireland will be spent contesting that case.

6.45 pm

We also know that under this legislation public money has been spent on raids: raids on people to find the pills; and raids on women who are trying to help other women in Northern Ireland. We know that 28 women a week are coming across to have an abortion in this country, so we know this is a very live issue, because they are only the ones who can afford to travel, who can travel because they have the travel documents, and who are not in an abusive relationship and can leave to come to England and Wales without being in trouble. We know that in 2017, on International Women’s Day, of all days, the PSNI carried out a number of searches and raids on women who are trying to help other women in Northern Ireland. We know that 28 women a week are coming across to have an abortion in this country, so we know this is a very live issue, because they are only the ones who can afford to travel, who can travel because they have the travel documents, and who are not in an abusive relationship and can leave to come to England and Wales without being in trouble. We know that in 2017, on International Women’s Day, of all days, the PSNI carried out a number of searches and seizures connected to the illegal purchase of abortion pills online. So as women were celebrating International Women’s Day, our sisters were being arrested because of this legislation written in 1861. Abortion should not be
directly. Right now, because of her Government’s failure that the commission is not able to bring cases. The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission is untenable. She agrees that it is an error that the situation with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission last week, she agrees for the antiquated legislation that is causing these human rights problems in Northern Ireland. I recognise that this situation arises in the first place because of antiquated legislation written in the United Kingdom, so it is right that this place takes responsibility for these issues for the people of Northern Ireland, but it would be better for us to make the change now, in control, and with credit being given where it is due, so that we can move forward and invest properly in Northern Ireland.

**Martin Whitfield:** When we look at the cases travelling through the courts and those we can anticipate are going to come forward, we see that there will be only one inevitable conclusion when the judgment comes out. What we have seen over the past few months is pure delay, which has cost money and drawn away from services in Northern Ireland. We know where this is going to end up and it would be better for us to make the change now, in control, and with credit being given where it is due, so that we can move forward and invest properly in Northern Ireland.

**Stella Creasy:** Again, I do not disagree. I believe that these are issues for the people of Northern Ireland, but I recognise that this situation arises in the first place because of antiquated legislation written in the United Kingdom, so it is right that this place takes responsibility for the antiquated legislation that is causing these human rights problems in Northern Ireland. The trouble for me with all this is that I know that the Secretary of State’s failure to uphold the basic human rights of the men and women of Northern Ireland. It is a direct, live issue. We heard on Second Reading concerns about the funding that was available for public services in Northern Ireland and about whether appropriate scrutiny was being undertaken. These amendments are trying to deal with that inconsistency where the Government wish somehow to make decisions about spending in Northern Ireland and set out precise sums, but not to uphold the other end of their bargain, which is to do right by the people of Northern Ireland and uphold their human rights.

The trouble for me with all this is that I know that the Secretary of State agrees, because as she said to the Women and Equalities Committee last week, she agrees that the situation with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission is untenable. She agrees that it is an error that the commission is not able to bring cases directly. Right now, because of her Government’s failure to act on these issues, we are in the position that it would take a rape victim coming to court and having to explain their situation to address the laws that we have.

The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) is absolutely right when she points to that Supreme Court ruling, which is what should really matter today, because that is where that public-purse money is going. The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission took the Government—our own Government—to court. How can we lecture on human rights around the world when our own Government are being taken to court? The Supreme Court ruled that the situation in Northern Ireland was “incompatible” with human rights; that it treated women—UK taxpayers—as “vehicles”; and that it was “untenable” and in need of “radical reconsideration”.

The Court stated:

“Those responsible for ensuring the compatibility of Northern Ireland law with the Convention rights will no doubt recognise and take account of these conclusions, as at early a time as possible, by considering whether and how to amend the law, in the light of the ongoing suffering being caused by it”.

That was June 2018, months and months ago—months of continued suffering for the people of Northern Ireland, and yes, in relation to today’s debate, months of continued expenditure from the public purse to keep these laws in place for women like Sarah Ewart, who went for a 19-week scan and was told that the baby she was carrying had a fatal defect, that the brain and skull had not developed properly and that it would inevitably die, either before it was born or moments after.

The horror about these laws is shown by the horror for Sarah Ewart and her family in the treatment that they then experienced, having had that devastating diagnosis. Mrs Ewart said that she was refused advice on how to seek a termination. When she asked about having an abortion at a hospital in Belfast, doctors informed her that it was not an option in Northern Ireland. When she inquired as to where she might be able to go to seek a termination elsewhere, they said they were not even able to give her any information to help her. They said their hands were tied: “We can’t tell you anything. We would be prosecuted if we give you that information.”

Some days later, having consulted as many people as she could and certain that hers was one of the rare and exceptional cases in which an abortion could be performed in Northern Ireland, Mrs Ewart met a second consultant. That woman bunched her files on the desk and said:

“I’m not going to prison for anyone.”

That is the chilling effect of this situation on the human rights of the woman of Northern Ireland in 2019. The High Court has told us that the situation is untenable. We know that the same egregious distress is caused by the situation around equal marriage. So when I see the Secretary of State saying that it is a devolved matter and trying to deny basic Vienna convention rights, I also see the mess we are in today with this legislation, whereby money will be wasted. There are rights that she should be upholding and acting to protect, but instead we will put money into prosecuting people—into raids and court cases. It is denying people their basic rights—rights that other courts will have to uphold. What a waste. What a waste of time, effort, money and, above all, dignity for the people of Northern Ireland.
These amendments and this debate are about the dignity of the people of Northern Ireland and about treating them as equal citizens of the United Kingdom. They are about not shirking our responsibility to those men and women to uphold their rights, not matter how uncomfortable that may be and no matter how difficult some in this Chamber may find it. The sight of Government-funded lawyers defending the denial of somebody’s right to love who they love must stop. The sight of public prosecutions of women trying to help other women have control over their own bodies—other Sarah Ewarts—has to stop.

The Secretary of State may tell me that the Bill is not the right vehicle to address these issues, or that they are all matters for devolution. What she has to tell me is how much longer the people of Northern Ireland will have to wait before their human rights are seen as equally important to the rights of the coalition. I put her on notice: she may not support our amendment, but equally important to the rights of the coalition. I put have to wait before their human rights are seen as all matters for devolution. What she has to tell me is the right vehicle to address these issues, or that they are sight of public prosecutions of women trying to help other women have control over their own bodies—other Sarah Ewarts—has to stop.

Sir Mike Penning: I say this with all due respect: I enjoyed the passionate speech of the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). I may not have agreed with every word, but frankly I agreed with the vast majority, even though I am a passionate believer in devolution.

I have sat in the Chamber for nearly five hours today, apart from the odd trip to powder my nose. I have intervened on a few Members, but I have made no speeches—I turned up five minutes into Second Reading, too late to speak. That is my fault and no one else’s, but I will try to make up for it now.

I have several points to make about the Bill, but there is one in particular that the hon. Lady might agree with. The first page of the Bill includes a compatibility statement:

“Secretary Karen Bradley has made the following statement under section 19(1)(a) of the Human Rights Act 1998:

In my view the provisions of the Northern Ireland Budget (Anticipation and Adjustments) (No. 2) Bill are compatible with the Convention rights.”

I am not convinced that the provisions are compatible with convention rights, nor am I convinced that the Bill will do what we were sent here to do. Representation through taxation, the principle that Parliament stands for in this democracy of ours, was set out 900 years ago: we are supposed to look at how the taxpayer’s money is being spent. In passing a Bill because there is no devolved Assembly in Stormont, frankly we are offering a sop to Sinn Féin, which will not participate either in this Chamber or in the Stormont Assembly—that is why it has collapsed.

We cannot say that on the one hand we are willing to pass the Bill, but that on the other hand this is a devolved matter; I think that that is the hon. Lady’s point. This type of Bill will keep coming back—she certainly will. If we believe in devolution, in the Union of this country and in the rights of the people of Northern Ireland to be represented not only here but in their Assembly in Stormont, at some stage we will have to bite the bullet and say that enough is enough. If a political party is not willing to participate, we—the Parliament of the Union of this great nation of ours—will have to step up to the plate and do something about it.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): Will the right hon. Gentleman give me two seconds? I am in a flow.

I have raised the issue with shadow Front Benchers and my own—I was a Northern Ireland Minister for a considerable period—because we have to address it. Perhaps I will come back to that point after the right hon. Gentleman’s intervention.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: The right hon. Gentleman puts forward the proposition that the only longer-term alternative to the current stalemate is direct rule. One understands that, but it has been argued today that the provisions of the Good Friday agreement and the concept of devolution are not sacrosanct and that they can be overridden. That is an interesting comment, but surely there is another solution. Of the five parties in a position to form a Government in Northern Ireland, four are prepared, on a cross-community basis, to form a Government without precondition. Might this Parliament stepping up to the mark finally lead us to recognise the need for democracy to move on in Northern Ireland, instead of a single faction being allowed to veto the people of Northern Ireland having their own Government?

Sir Mike Penning: I cannot disagree with a single word that my right hon. Friend has said. This cannot continue; we cannot sit in a situation where there is no way of looking properly at how civil servants are spending taxpayers’ money. That is not the principle of this democracy, and it is not the principle on which I was elected to this House. We must have a methodology. If this House voted to go forward with four parties instead of the five, somewhere along the line Sinn Féin would suddenly wake up and smell the coffee. But at the moment we are not challenging Sinn Féin. We are accepting that they have this veto. We are accepting that this House, in this great Union of ours, is not going to challenge the convention whereby Sinn Féin can say, “No, there is no devolved Assembly in Northern Ireland.”

7 pm

The aspect that fascinated me even more when I was a Minister was that, even when we had the Administration up and running, any party could veto decisions anyhow. We have to make sure that democracy thrives in the same way that we try to teach the rest of world. At the moment, we are shirking that responsibility, if we are being really honest. The shadow Secretary of State was kind in offering that he would turn up to an Adjournment debate to explain Labour party policy, but I do not think that is quite where we are. I am more than happy to have an Adjournment debate, but I think that I would be outnumbered in that I want us to progress.

Do I want direct rule? No. But it may be one of the only threats, which is why I keep saying “when”, not “if”. Unless we set a date, we are going to be back here in September and next spring. At that time, the fantastic, brave work that happened to give us the Good Friday agreement will be lost and Northern Ireland will go backwards. We saw the bombs in Londonderry the other day. The New IRA—as they like to call themselves—are there, although there is nothing new about them; they are old-fashioned terrorists. The people of Northern
Ireland want something tangible to hold on to. It cannot be right that their health service and education system are in decline, and we have heard about many other problems today, although it was a very short list from my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I have heard much longer lists from him on many an occasion, and quite rightly so.

Let me tell the Secretary of State that I voted against these measures on Third Reading the last time they came before the House. I hope that the Whip is also listening, because this is important. I voted against the Bill—only the second time that I have ever voted against my Government—because there was no provision to protect the veterans who served this country so brilliantly in the police, in the other emergency services and particularly the veterans who served this country so brilliantly because of agreements that came through with the Good Friday agreement, yet there is absolutely nothing at all from my Government for veterans in this legislation or in any other measure. There is lots of talk from the Government that they are trying to address this or that, but these veterans served this country of ours. If they have done something fundamentally wrong, I think that we might actually have had them in court and sorted it out over the last 40 years.

As the shadow Secretary of State said, some victims are dying off now and they need to get their compensation, quite rightly. I do not think the British taxpayer would ever understand if we gave victim’s compensation to a terrorist—not just an alleged terrorist but a convicted terrorist—when our own veterans are being dragged through the courts, paid for by the taxpayer. Am I missing something here?

This budget is a substantial one. It is basically the same budget as last year, as we have heard—and why? Because no one is there to make decisions. I was sent to this place to make decisions not only for my constituency but for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I lost colleagues in Northern Ireland. I cannot sit back and say we are just going to carry on while there is a devolved Assembly out there that for two years has just been sitting there gathering dust, and then say that we are going to push this budget through but not take on the responsibility, or a version of responsibility, for direct rule. The Minister of State and the Secretary of State have a massively important role. It is a balancing act—a balancing act that is leaning too far towards Sinn Féin, in my opinion, and that is why we do not have an Assembly in Northern Ireland.

Gavin Newlands: It is a pleasure, Mrs Laing, to see Renfrewshire represented in the Chair.

I rise to speak very briefly at this stage, although perhaps not quite as briefly as the Secretary of State. Despite some disagreement from the Northern Ireland branch of my fan club on the Benches behind me, I stated clearly on Second Reading the SNP’s view, at least, of the commensurate funding that Scotland would be able to receive as a result of the additional Northern Ireland budget allocation.

It should be noted that the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly have just simultaneously debated, voted on and passed a motion calling on the Prime Minister to rule out no deal and to extend article 50. That is the first time that this has happened in the history of devolution. But I digress—I just wanted to put that on the record.

I made my point, notwithstanding the comments by the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), on the clear and distinct issues present in Northern Ireland, which I wholly accept. But no Scottish MP worth their salt, or Scottish Secretary for that matter, would accept this situation without at least trying to ensure that Scotland received proportionate funding, and it is not cheap to attempt to do so. I outlined my reasoning at length on Second Reading, so I will curtail my remarks at this stage. Suffice it to say that the extra funds announced for this budget, which would amount to £400 million if Barnettised, could amount to 4,100 police officers, 4,500 nurses and 4,400 junior doctors. At this time when the Scottish Government are doubling childcare funding, an extra 5,000-plus nursery teachers could be paid for by Barnett consequentials from all the £140 million, or an entire borders railway with the £106 million change. Or, taken in the round, the extra £3.4 billion flowing from the DUP’s confidence and supply agreement, in addition to the new moneys, could be transformational. It could fund another three Aberdeen bypasses or nearly three additional Queensferry crossings, should we ever need such things.

Sammy Wilson: I am just wondering why so many people would want to bypass Aberdeen that it needs three roads round it.

Gavin Newlands: I pass no comment on Aberdeen, but this road has been a long time coming. The Scottish Government have just ordered it; thankfully there was an opportunity to say that. Sadly, even though the £3.4 billion could cover the cost of almost three Queensferry crossings, it would not even cover the cost of two Chris Graylings.

Clearly, we are unable to pursue this issue any further during the passage of this Bill, but the Scottish Secretary, the Chancellor and the Northern Ireland Secretary can rest assured that pursue it we will.

Tony Lloyd: This has been an interesting debate so far. I will not name the hon. Members, but some unfortunate references have been made to civil servants in the Northern Ireland Office. I deplore those remarks. I deplore remarks about people who have no capacity in this House to answer for themselves. I deplore the remarks for another reason. Whatever people think about the institution of the Northern Ireland Office, ultimately it is politicians—I make no criticism of politicians when I say this—who make the decisions. Civil servants are there to advise and implement. I want to put that on the record, because it is important that the House knows, and in particular that those who work for us know, that those criticisms are not a uniform view of their behaviour.

Emma Little Pengelly: I know that things can be said, and there is a range of views, but I think that I can certainly speak for everybody on the DUP Benches when I say that over the last number of years, our civil servants in Northern Ireland and across have been
working incredibly hard in very difficult circumstances. I can say that because I see it on a week-to-week basis—I wish it was a day-to-day basis, but I am stuck over here most of the time—because my husband is a senior civil servant. I think I speak for us all when I say that we recognise the incredible, hard work that they have done under difficult circumstances, and we applaud them for that.

**Tony Lloyd:** I strongly thank the hon. Lady for her helpful remarks, which correct the record.

I thought that giving a direct answer to the question posed by the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) was the direct answer. I am not quite sure what more I can do to amplify no, when no means no. Nevertheless, I am always happy to continue to debate these issues. This debate, by its nature, is not necessarily the most appropriate time, but we will continue the conversation anywhere, any time, within reason.

Importantly, I want to refer to the very imaginative amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). The right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) said that he agreed with nearly every word she uttered; I agree with every word. It is important to say that, because there are issues of practical humanity involved. I have met Sarah Ewart and other women from Northern Ireland who have sought the safe, legal abortion that women in the rest of the United Kingdom hope but take for granted, whatever criticisms we make of our health service. That is really important, because the devastation caused to people’s lives by their inability to access things that are taken for granted elsewhere ought to be brought to a conclusion.

People have different views. I am well aware that people in this Chamber have different views on the issues of equal marriage and abortion, but these are basic issues of human rights. It is right and proper that my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow has raised these issues tonight, because they need airing.

I will not repeat everything that my hon. Friend said, but any woman who loses a wanted baby is already part of an individual tragedy and a familial tragedy, and many people in this House will know that from their personal experience. For a woman who conceives in hope but finds that the baby the conceives is born, sadly, to die is an immense tragedy. For that to then be compounded by an inability to seek the help and basic guidance that I hope members of my family and people living in the rest of the United Kingdom take for granted is not a tragedy; it is a disgrace. My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

There is an irony in this, as the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) pointed out. Our Supreme Court’s decision was interesting. It was not a judgment, but its analysis and recommendation was absolutely unambiguous on where the law stands. Nobody can doubt what the Supreme Court said. However, the odd thing is that the Supreme Court’s judgment was a narrow one. It said in that case that the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission had no competence to take the case forward. Because it was taken on behalf of a real human being, it now falls back on that individual to refight the case through the lower courts, with all the time that will take and all the personal trauma it will cause. In the meantime, many other women will, of course, be denied access to safe and legal abortions that would be available anywhere else.

**Tony Lloyd:** In that context, we have to recognise something fundamental in the Supreme Court’s judgment, and it comes down to two things. It is interesting that the Secretary of State has rightly indicated—I congratulate her on this—that she will now reform the law to give the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission the locus to take cases through the court process in the way that it has not been allowed to do in the past. I hope we can see early resolution of that, which we look forward to, and she is right to do it.

The judgment also sharpens the focus on something else very specific. The Supreme Court judgment was a judgment not about the Stormont process, but about the compatibility of the United Kingdom with our obligations under the European convention on human rights. Since the United Kingdom is in breach of its obligations, the necessary process to exculpate us from that particular critique is a UK one. We can hide behind devolution, but that is not appropriate. If we prefer, we can hide instead behind the narrowness of the fact that the Court could not make this a judgment. However, one way or the other, we know what the judgment would be, and we know that this is for the UK. If the Secretary of State wants to refer this to her colleagues in the Government, I think we would all be very happy with that in order to see rights Commission take the locus law stands. Nobody can doubt what the Supreme Court said. However, the odd thing is that the Supreme Court’s judgment was a narrow one. It said in that case that the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission had no competence to take the case forward. Because it was taken on behalf of a real human being, it now falls back on that individual to refight the case through the lower courts, with all the time that will take and all the personal trauma it will cause. In the meantime, many other women will, of course, be denied access to safe and legal abortions that would be available anywhere else.
[Tony Lloyd]

In the meantime, however, it is not Stormont or Northern Ireland that is in breach of its treaty obligations, but the United Kingdom. Because it is the United Kingdom, the obligation is on this UK Parliament to be the one that now resolves the issue.

I will not go on at any greater length, but I hope I have made the Labour party position very clear. We would support any action in this Chamber to resolve the two issues of equal marriage and of the safe and equal abortion for women in Northern Ireland. I hope that the Secretary of State, emboldened by that commitment, will recognise that justice can now be served only by moving forward to prevent the experiences of the Sarah Ewarts of this world, to prevent a mother facing potential criminalisation because she wants to help her daughter, to help women who try to obtain the morning-after pill and are under investigation by the PSNI and to move our world forward and put those in Northern Ireland in the same position as I would expect for my own constituents.

Karen Bradley: This has been an interesting debate with some passionately held views clearly expressed.

Let me touch briefly on the comments made by the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), who talked about the moneys allocated in the written ministerial statement. Clearly, we are not voting on those today; we are voting on the vote on account. Let us be very clear what the Bill is. He needs to recognise the unique pressure that Northern Ireland faces, particularly because of the lack of Ministers for more than two years. These matters need to be resolved, but they need to be resolved in Stormont by a devolved Executive dealing with these budgetary pressures. I am sure that he will understand why the written ministerial statement included the additional money—it was because of the unique pressures faced by Northern Ireland.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) was thoughtful, as always, and passionate about the matters he cares so desperately about. I know of his support for our veterans and retired police officers who served in Northern Ireland during the troubles, and he has campaigned for them long and hard for many years. I assure him that I want the situation to change. I want things to be different, because none of us wants the current situation to continue. That is why we have consulted on how we can best take forward legislation in this place, as agreed in the Stormont House agreement, which he will know so well having served in Northern Ireland just before that took place. Of course, the Stormont House agreement happened when my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, was a Minister in the Northern Ireland Office.

We want to take that work forward, and I would very much like to work with my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead on the responses to the consultation. We have had more than 17,000, and we are still working our way through some traumatic, difficult and individual responses. I would like to work with him personally to get his expertise and wisdom fed into the process so that we can ensure that those brave service personnel and retired police officers who made sure that peace was possible are treated with the dignity they so rightly deserve.

I turn now to amendment 2, tabled by the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), who told me that she has put me on notice. I do not think that the first time she has done so, and I am sure that it will not be the last. I know how hard she campaigns on this issue and how much she cares about it. We have debates on it and I will not rehearse the conversations we have had. She knows my personal position, but she also, I know, understands the constitutional situation and that what we all want to see is a restored Government in Stormont that can then take forward the measures that she has talked about and those brought to the Supreme Court when the Executive were taken to court.

The shadow Secretary of State talked about the UK Government. Clearly, legally the UK Government are always the defendant in such cases. We are the member state that is signed up to the treaties. However, it was the position of the laws of Northern Ireland as set out by the Executive and the Assembly that was challenged following the 2016 vote when a push to change the law on fatal foetal abnormality, rape and incest was defeated in the Assembly, with the majority of the then Assembly Members voting against that change.

The shadow Secretary of State also talked about the legal standing of the Human Rights Commission, and I have said on the record on a number of occasions that what came out from the Supreme Court judgment was an anomaly in the law that nobody knew was there. In 1998, when the Northern Ireland Act was passed and the Commission was established, everyone believed it had the same legal standing as commissions in other parts of the United Kingdom that were established at around the same time as devolution happened around the UK. Clearly, that is not the case and steps therefore need to be taken to address that point. I agree that we do not want women who are victims of the situation having to come to court and make the case themselves.

Gavin Robinson: Just on that brief point, which I raised with the Secretary of State last week: in the interests of clarity, transparency and the scrutiny that the Chair of the Select Committee has asked for, will the Secretary of State provide details, after this evening, to confirm the point about an error in the grounding legislation for the Human Rights Commission? She knows that in Northern Ireland, unlike in England and Wales, we have a separated Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and Human Rights Commission, and that the Equality Commission does have standing. Will she provide detail and clarity to confirm the position she has taken, which is that it is an error in the law?

Karen Bradley: I will of course be very happy to provide the hon. Gentleman with more information on that point. Everybody believed that the Human Rights Commission had legal standing. The HRC took the case believing it had legal standing, but it was only during the Supreme Court judgment that that point was clarified. I am very happy to share the information on that point with him.

Returning to the point raised by the hon. Member for Walthamstow about the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018 and the amendment to section 4 that she pressed to a vote and that this House accepted late last year, clearly the Act cannot change the law in Northern Ireland. The guidance I have issued on what I expect the Northern
Ireland Office to do is very clear, but it cannot in itself change the law. I do not have the power to do that through that Act of Parliament. However, I do keep under review the obligations we have on the matter.

I want to be very clear and to state very clearly that the UK Government remain committed to their obligations under international law, including the European convention on human rights. It is important to recognise that it is for the devolved Administrations across the whole UK to ensure that their domestic laws and actions are compliant. The observance and implementation of international obligations, and obligations under the European convention on human rights, so far as they are otherwise within the competence of the Assembly, are matters for the Northern Ireland Assembly.

If I can make one final important point, I support the principle of the amendment on same-sex marriage, which was not selected today, and I have been clear on the record that I want changes to the legislation relating to abortion in Northern Ireland. However, those are matters for a restored Executive. We want a restored Executive to progress legislation on that issue as one of the first things they do.

**Maria Caulfield:** Given that this is the second year that this place is bringing forward a Northern Ireland budget Bill—there is another Northern Ireland Bill tomorrow—and given that the debates we have had with the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and on the veterans issues raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), does the Secretary of State not think that passing all the stages of a Bill in one day does a disservice to the people of Northern Ireland? We need proper scrutiny of the Bill through the normal process that any other Bill would have.

**Karen Bradley:** What we are doing today is effectively the estimates process. The moneys we are voting on today have all been voted for and properly scrutinised in this House. We are confirming the departmental spending in 2018-19, so for this current financial year. That spending was done on a proper statutory basis, with the moneys having been properly voted through this place and properly scrutinised in this place in terms of the block grant given to the Northern Ireland Office. What would happen normally is that the Northern Ireland Assembly would hold an estimates day, which would probably be about the same length of time. At the end of it, it would vote on the estimates. We are therefore effectively doing the same thing, but we have to do it through primary legislation because we are unable to do it in any other way in the absence of the Assembly sitting.

I know that that is not satisfactory and I know it does not feel right to those of us who are used to the full scrutiny of Bills, but I gently say that we are probably giving the Bill about the same amount of time it would have had in the Assembly if it was sitting. This is a very technical Bill. It is about making sure we agree that the spending that has already happened has been done on the proper legislative statutory footing and that we agree that more spending can take place next year without going into any further details about the allocations, merely that we accept that 70% of prior year spending can be spent by the Department without the need for further legislation. I hope that clarifies the point further.

**Tony Lloyd:** The Secretary of State is touching on an important point. Of course, the retrospective nature of the Bill and the estimates comparison are significant. With other departmental budgets that come through the House, there are different mechanisms of scrutiny, which do not apply here. The Secretary of State has heard the profound argument from both sides of the House that if this happens in the future—like her, I hope it does not—we should begin to think about a better way of separating the Second Reading process and the detailed scrutiny.

7.30 pm

**Karen Bradley:** I absolutely understand the hon. Gentleman’s point, but I gently say that this is a very technical Bill that is putting spending that has already happened on a statutory basis. It is about money that has been scrutinised in this House, which we have voted to be allocated to Northern Ireland in previous debates. We are talking about putting the decisions that civil servants took and the money that we have agreed that they can spend on a proper statutory basis. I absolutely understand the frustrations about a lack of scrutiny—I want more scrutiny. However, the right, constitutional way to do that—the way this House has agreed we should do that—is to have an Assembly and Executive sitting in Stormont doing the appropriate scrutiny.

I return to the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Walthamstow. I know how strongly she feels about this issue, and I know that she wants to see change, but this is not the Bill to do it in. This is a technical Bill. She wants success in what she is trying to achieve, and I therefore urge her to withdraw the amendment.

**Stella Creasy:** The Secretary of State, by refusing to recognise her responsibility to uphold the human rights of the people of Northern Ireland, is creating a situation by which public money will potentially be spent on cases like the one that Sarah Ewart was involved in. What is her message to Sarah Ewart and all the other women she is letting down by refusing to stand up for their human rights?

**Karen Bradley:** I do not accept what the hon. Lady said. We have appropriate and proper separation of the judiciary and Parliament. The prosecuting services in Northern Ireland, the police and others must decide what investigations they undertake, based on the law as it stands. Her concerns are with the law, and I understand that. I very gently say to her that I and the UK Government are committed to all our obligations under international law, including the European convention on human rights. It is for the politicians whom the people of Northern Ireland elected to do the right thing by those people. I understand how strongly the hon. Lady feels about this issue, but this is not the right vehicle for what she wants to do. I urge her to withdraw the amendment.

**Stella Creasy:** I recognise that this is a spending Bill and is not the right place for this, but I want to put the Secretary of State on notice that until she recognises her responsibility for human rights, this House will take every single opportunity to speak up for the Sarah Ewarts of Northern Ireland. She clearly will not, but we will.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.
Clauses 2 to 9 ordered to stand part of the Bill.
Schedules 1 to 4 agreed to.
The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair:

Bill reported, without amendment.

Third Reading

7.35 pm

Karen Bradley: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I will keep my remarks to a minimum, as we have had a long day and considerable debate on the matters raised. We have heard some very passionate and heartfelt contributions from right hon. and hon. Members. I thank them all for their contributions. I also thank the Minister and the Whips for their work, the Opposition and SNP spokespeople and all the officials who helped to put the Bill together.

This is not something any of us wished to do again. We want to see a devolved Government in Stormont because many of the matters raised today should rightly be dealt with by politicians elected by the people of Northern Ireland—that is what we want to see—and I very much hope that I will not be back doing a budget Bill again for Northern Ireland. That said, I am grateful that the House has supported the Bill so far and I hope that it will now support its Third Reading.

7.37 pm

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: On behalf of my right hon. and hon. Friends, I place on the record our appreciation of the Secretary of State, her officials and the Minister for their co-operation in discussing the detail of the Bill and our appreciation for the additional funding, which is greatly needed to address issues in Northern Ireland.

I echo the comments of the Secretary of State. DUP Members sincerely hope that this evening will be the last time the House will need to deal on this temporary basis with the budget for Northern Ireland. We truly hope that by this time next year we will have a functioning devolved Government and Assembly that can do the job, provide the scrutiny and bring forward proposals for public expenditure in Northern Ireland. We agree that this is not a desirable way to do things—it is not our wish that it should happen this way—but we appreciate the time the House has devoted to it. I wish we had more time for scrutiny, but we understand why we are where we are. The DUP is committed to working towards the restoration of devolved government. The sooner it happens the better.

7.38 pm

Tony Lloyd: Some of the principles in this debate do not divide the House. Some are clearly matters of enormous importance. What has come through time and again is that the process of examining the competence of the budgetary process is not written into the procedures of the House, and I urge the Secretary of State to think about how we can make accountability and transparency more efficient, even in this coming year, because there will be further stages of the budgetary process for 2019-20. That is my first point.

Secondly, while I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) for not pressing her amendment, I think that she raised an enormously important issue. Let me say gently to the Secretary of State—I hope she will take this on board—that at present the remedy for the United Kingdom’s failure to honour its obligations lies with the United Kingdom Government, and it is the United Kingdom Government who must search for that remedy.

My final point concerns something on which the whole House is agreed. The people who are being let down by the lack of a Stormont Assembly are not the people of Rochdale or the people of the Secretary of State’s Staffordshire Moorlands constituency, but, ultimately, the people of Northern Ireland. With that in mind, I urge the Secretary of State to ensure that a real effort and a real emphasis are directed towards all-party talks to bring that situation to a conclusion.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (WATER)

That the draft Conservation (Natural Habitats etc.) (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved. —[Amanda Milling.]

Question agreed to.

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION)

That the draft Environment (Miscellaneous Amendments) (Northern Ireland) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved. —[Amanda Milling.]

Question agreed to.

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ROAD TRAFFIC)

That the draft Motor Vehicles (Compulsory Insurance) (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 24 January, be approved. —[Amanda Milling.]

The Deputy Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 6 March (Standing Order No. 41A).

PETITION

Police force funding

7.42 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I wish to present a petition on the topical issue of inadequate funding for police forces, signed by Mr Tony Weafer, residents and business owners in Southampton; it has been signed by 956 constituents in total. The business owners and residents of Shirley in my constituency have expressed concern about cuts in police funding and the inability of the police force to secure sufficient funds from central Government to protect people in this country adequately from the frightening increase in crime.
The petition states:
To the House of Commons.
The petition of residents and business owners of Southampton in Hampshire, declares that the Police Force is unable to secure sufficient funds from Central Government in order to adequately protect the people of this country from the frightening increase in crime. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that the Police have the resources they need to adequately protect the people of this country.
And the petitioners remain, etc.

Families of Commonwealth Soldiers
Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Amanda Milling.)

7.43 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to raise this issue. Let me begin by paying tribute to all the men and women who serve in our armed forces. They put their lives on the line to protect ours and those of millions of people around the world.

My constituency is home to Fort George, the Black Watch, 3rd Battalion, and 500 soldiers. To them, and each and every one of the others, we owe a debt of gratitude for their service. That, of course, includes more than 6,000 men and women serving in the armed forces from foreign and Commonwealth countries, a number that is set to increase as the Army embarks on yet more recruitment campaigns across the Commonwealth.

In response to the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith), the Defence Secretary has said:
“We expect up to 1,350 Commonwealth citizens to join our armed forces next year.”—[Official Report, 26 November 2018; Vol. 650, c. 3.]

Like any other soldiers, sailors and aircrew, they will put their lives on the line in our service, and they will do so under the direction of this Government’s Ministry of Defence. Reflected in their service is the sacrifice also made by their families, who will find themselves affected. They are sometimes uprooted, and often left with the anxiety of knowing that their loved ones are doing a difficult and dangerous job.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) for securing this debate; I have always wanted to say that right, and I have had the luck to do so. The hon. Gentleman has been very outspoken and diligent in taking this matter forward. Does he agree that we have a duty of care to those who fight for Queen and country in whatever form that takes, that that extends to the family of service personnel and that it is outrageous that it is not currently discharged as well as he and I would expect?

Drew Hendry: Absolutely; my hon. Friend makes a great point. As I was going on to say, the sacrifice is also made by the families. They have the anxiety of their loved ones doing a difficult and dangerous job, yet their sacrifices often go untold.

As the Army Families Federation has said,
“Commonwealth members of our Armed Forces make up a significant and vital part of the UK’s Defence capability and, as a nation, we ask them to make significant sacrifices to do so.”

Is it right that the sacrifices they make in undertaking the duty of service should mean being kept apart from their families? No, it is simply not right; yet it is continually happening. The current immigration rules are keeping Commonwealth soldiers apart from their families. The report from the AFF reads:

“The UK recruits soldiers from across the Commonwealth to serve in our Armed Forces. There are currently over 6,000 personnel serving in the UK Armed Forces from foreign and Commonwealth countries, with more being recruited each year to fill technical and specialist roles.
Since December 2013, those who leave their country of origin to serve our nation are subjected to the Government’s minimum income requirements if they wish to bring their immediate family with them.

This requirement means that due to military pay scales, a Commonwealth soldier with a spouse and two children can end up waiting up to six years before they earn over the £24,800 needed for their family to join them.

It cannot be right that those who have signed up to defend our nation by serving in the Armed Forces are doing so at the expense of their family life. The current situation can result in personnel making the heart-breaking decision of choosing which child they bring with them to the UK and which they leave behind until their income has increased. The MIT should be removed as a barrier from those who serve in the Armed Forces.”

Louise Simpson, chair of the Cobseo Foreign and Commonwealth cluster, has said:

“We struggle to engage with recruiters to make sure that soldiers and service personnel understand the financial commitment that they have when coming to the UK particularly around the cost of visas and the minimum income requirements. There was a lot of press...about soldiers not understanding that they may not be able to bring their children in for almost 4 years because they are not earning the right amount of money. As an organisation, we feel that is immoral”.

She is right; that is immoral. This Government must accept that fact.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is doing the armed forces a great service. Does he agree that we must remember that these Commonwealth soldiers put their lives on the line just like British soldiers and therefore should be treated in the same way as British soldiers in terms of family, instead of having this limit of £24,000 and waiting for six years?

Drew Hendry: I absolutely and fundamentally agree. It is a disgrace that people are being asked to put themselves on the line and at risk without qualifying for the same conditions as others enjoy just because they were born in one of the nations of the UK.

In 2011 the Government announced plans to introduce a new policy on family migration. One of the major changes was to make the level of income threshold “higher than that of the safety net of income support.”

Subsequently, the armed forces immigration rules introduced in the first quarter of 2013 closely aligned themselves to the rules for non-military and introduced the requirement for a soldier with one child to be earning at least £22,400 and a further £2,400 for each additional child. It could be many years before a recruit earns the salary needed to meet the threshold.

In 2011, the Government enshrined the armed forces covenant in statute. The Army Families Federation and the Cobseo Foreign and Commonwealth cluster group have urged the Government to consider the principles of the covenant with regard to the family needs of Commonwealth personnel. Commonwealth recruits find it very difficult to hold down a second job, due to their irregular hours. They also stand alone as a cohort within the armed forces, in that they are forcibly separated from their immediate dependants on recruitment, unlike their domestic peers.

In August 2014, the Prime Minister announced the introduction of a family test to be applied by Departments when devising policy. The guidance and documentation for the test state:

“Strong and stable families, in all their forms, play an important role in our society. Families have a major impact on the life chances of individuals and strong family relationships are recognised as an important component of individual, community and national wellbeing.”

While we think about those words, let us consider the case study of an Army private who enlisted in 2013, just prior to the new rules coming into effect. He had not even had the chance to bring his family to the UK, as he had not finished training. He has two children and a wife back home in Ghana, and he has been separated from them for six years. He is now earning enough to bring his wife and one of his children to the UK, but it will be another two to three years before he can bring his other child here. He is faced with the agonising decision of choosing which child should join him and his wife in the UK. How can that be right?

The family test sets out a number of questions that Departments should apply when devising policies that risk affecting families. Those questions include:

“What impacts will the policy have on all family members’ ability to play a full role in family life, including with respect to parenting and other caring responsibilities?”

The previous Chief of the Defence Staff commented in the Ministry of Defence’s 2016 strategy that our personnel could fully carry out their defence tasks only if they had the support of their families and the confidence that their loved ones would be able to access the right support when required.

In September 2017, a soldier who had been refused a visa for the UK as a result of the minimum income threshold appealed, with the assistance of the Army Families Federation, on the basis of exceptional circumstances. The judge said that the appeal was successful in the light of the compassionate circumstances of the case, particularly noting that the sponsor had a legitimate expectation that he would be able to bring his family to the UK when he signed up to the armed forces in 2017. He said:

“I find that it is not in the public interest to exclude the appellant”.

It is time to amend the existing immigration rules on the minimum income threshold to exempt the families of serving armed forces personnel.

However, the difficulties do not end there. My constituent, Denis Omondi, is a serving soldier in the British Army who, in 2011, found out that he was the father of a little girl in Kenya. He had previously been unaware of his daughter’s existence, but he then sprang into action, meeting and visiting his daughter as often as he could. There was an instant connection between them, and they are indeed a dad and daughter, so when his daughter’s birth mother said that she could no longer look after her, Denis became Ann’s sole custodian. He pays for her education and living costs in Kenya and is proudly responsible for her care and wellbeing. Understandably, he takes the role of being her dad very seriously. He also takes his job very seriously. He is a British citizen and a serving soldier in 3 Scots, Black Watch, stationed at Fort George, where he has loyaly served, undertaking tours in Afghanistan, Iraq and Cyprus. Despite the demands of his work, he has used every opportunity to visit and spend time with Ann in Kenya.
With his wife battling cancer and as a dad missing his daughter, Denis set about applying for a visa to bring her to live with them in the highlands. To him, it was simply the most natural thing for them finally to be together as a family. Imagine his heartache when he opened the letter from the Home Office telling him that Ann’s visa application had been rejected. The reason given was that the Home Office considered that this soldier, committed to serving in the British Army, had not spent enough time with Ann to prove the relationship. That happened despite him providing evidence of visits, photos and calls with Ann, correspondence with teachers and care providers and much more. Denis and his wife were in disbelief at the news, and Ann was devastated to be kept apart from her family.

I could not believe it when I heard about their plight so, in this very Chamber, I pleaded with the Prime Minister to right the wrong. She promised that the Home Secretary would investigate personally, and he readily nodded his agreement. I thought that common sense and common decency would prevail, but that has not yet been the case. Since then, the anxiety, cost and pressure has built up on the Omondi family. A promise to look again eventually came, but only after relentless chasing. Confusion and chaos at the Home Office meant that I had to raise the case again, this time with the Secretary of State for Scotland.

Incidentally, I thank the Immigration Minister for the apology for saying that Daughtry, Shelagh and myself had told lies about the situation with the missing paperwork and about the fact that no conversations with the Omondis had come from the Home Office. It has been said to me in writing that the Home Office apologises for that, and I am grateful, but I would rather that it got on with sorting the situation out for the Omondis. Here we are: a Prime Minister, two Secretaries of State, a heartbroken family and still no answer on whether this serving soldier will be reunited with his only daughter.

I found out today that so distrustful is the Home Office that it has arranged with a South African agency to call Ann and her birth mother to check out the detailed information supplied by the Omondis. I cannot believe that we would trust a member of the armed forces to go and put his life on the line for us, yet we cannot trust the information that he and his family are directly supplying here in the UK. What does that say?

“Your Army needs you” is a recruitment call-out, and the website details many benefits of joining, including promises of child and adult safeguarding and support for emotional wellbeing, all of which is sanctioned and promoted by the Ministry of Defence. Those promises will seem pretty hollow if the UK Government fail to do the right thing by someone whom they have called on to serve for them. Let us expedite this case so that this family can be reunited. The Tory Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, a former lieutenant colonel in the British Army, said:

“Commonwealth troops should be able to bring their kids to Britain. If they fight for us, they should be able to live with us.”

I agree.

Veterans Aid responded to my note this morning by saying:

“Since 2007 we have interacted with nearly 700 Foreign & Commonwealth veterans seeking help with status issues. These range from regularization of their own status to complicated appeals to reunite, or keep together, families. Indeed during 2012-14—well before the scale of the Windrush debacle was revealed—we highlighted two landmark cases that effected a change in the law.”

More recently, in a case remarkably similar to the one that I have described, Veterans Aid “successfully helped to reunite a father from Sierra Leone with his daughter. It took nine months to resolve.”

That is not Veterans Aid’s core business, but on the basis of considerable experience with a similar case, it was happy to advise if required. The charity continued:

“Behind each ‘case’ there is a tale of human misery and while the details differ, the causes rarely do. Residency and status regulations are complex and inflexible. Advice to those about to leave the Armed Forces is either not given, or not given a priority. Costs relating to residency and citizenship applications are prohibitively high—and well beyond the budget of a typical former infantry soldier with a family.”

When families are in this country, the difficulties do not end, and they continue when soldiers do manage to be reunited with their families. One such case is that of another constituent of mine, a serving Commonwealth soldier who has done tours in Afghanistan, Kenya, Jordan, Cyprus, Germany, Ireland and France. His wife and stepdaughter applied for naturalisation in September 2017, but there is no decision yet.

Jim Shannon: Once again, the hon. Gentleman has advanced a very good, comprehensive case. The soldier in the field who is doing his duty in uniform is always conscious of his family back home. The distress that he obviously experiences because of what is happening is bound to have an effect on him in the field, as it does on his family back home. Is it not really important that the Minister now, in response to the hon. Gentleman, takes this case on personally and sorts it out as soon as possible?

Drew Hendry: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his words. Absolutely—it is just the right thing to do. There is no doubt here. He is absolutely right about the effect on people.

As I was saying, my constituent’s wife and daughter applied for naturalisation, with no decision yet. That means that despite his being a UK citizen, his wife and daughter do not have recourse to public funds and are not allowed to work, and the Home Office currently has all their identification documents. They have been waiting well over a year, and are yet another family of a Commonwealth soldier suffering at the hands of the Home Office, which insists that the case is “complex”. When I ask for a timeline for the decision, we are told that it cannot give us one, and so on.

Another case is that of Emmanuel, who is happy to be named. He wanted to bring his auntie over for a visit, but was unable to do so because she did not earn enough in Ghana, and the Home Office would not accept him paying for her visit here. He basically just wanted to see his family before he went off for a tour in Iraq in 2018. He wrote to my assistant, Callum:

“Dear Callum,

Good day and thank you very much for getting in touch.

Even though we felt abandoned in our own case, I will be more than glad for the MP to mention my case as an example and use my name if need be, so Parliament and the Home Office knows that these are real issues affecting real Commonwealth people.
I am sad to say that after two attempts, my auntie never was issued the visa. This is unacceptable, what is happening to Commonwealth citizens serving in the British army and it’s super bad for the recruitment drive!

It’s bad enough that these men and women, having signed blank cheques with their lives for this country, still pay the full cost for their naturalization to become British, and yet their loved ones cannot even visit them to keep them sane. My support for Mr Omondi in getting his daughter’s massive, as it affects all of us Commonwealth people, especially when I and my partner have experienced this illness. We are still devastated by what has happened to us, because I was going through postnatal depression then. Extend our thanks to Mr Drew for flying the Commonwealth flag for us in this matter.

All these cases are simple. We have asked these people to come and do a duty for us—to put their life at risk, and to obviously involve their families, because that is a part of the job. I am asking the Minister now to take this seriously. In the case of Mr Omondi, I would like an answer. In the case of this entire situation for all Commonwealth armed services personnel, there is a big job to do to sort this out. Let us see the changes made that need to be made, and let us see those Commonwealth soldiers and armed forces personnel treated with the dignity that they deserve.

8.3 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): I thank the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) for bringing this subject to our attention during tonight’s debate. As he said, we are all rightly proud of our armed forces and the contribution made to the tri-services, whether it be the Army, the Royal Air Force or the Royal Navy, by our Commonwealth personnel. There is a long tradition of recruitment from the Commonwealth, which we are all proud to see continuing. Like the hon. Gentleman, I have a military base in my constituency—the School of Army Aviation at Middle Wallop.

In the Home Office, as in all other Departments, we are absolutely committed to upholding our obligations under the armed forces covenant, to ensure that no one who is serving or has served, or their family, is disadvantaged because of that service. The Home Office works closely with the Ministry of Defence and the individual services to make sure that those who choose to enlist in Her Majesty’s forces are well informed and fully aware of what the immigration requirements are for them and their families.

As the Immigration Minister, I am responsible for the borders, immigration and citizenship system, including how it applies to the armed forces. That includes our provisions for foreign and Commonwealth members of Her Majesty’s forces, foreign and Commonwealth family members of our service personnel and members of international armed forces and their families. I am also the Minister with responsibility for the armed forces covenant and veterans’ issues in the Home Office, which means I take a direct interest in the issues affecting our current and former service personnel and their families. I take extremely seriously my role of ensuring that the immigration system operates in supporting the families of our dedicated service personnel who join Her Majesty’s forces from Commonwealth countries. That involves keeping up to speed with the work conducted by the Ministry of Defence and other Departments in delivering our cross-Government commitment to our armed forces covenant obligations. It also includes keeping our policies relating to the armed forces under review, and acknowledging and championing where our policies are meeting our covenant obligations.

Drew Hendry: I am grateful for the Minister’s comments about the armed forces covenant. Will she take account of the request of the AFF and Cobseo foreign and Commonwealth cluster group urging the Government to consider the principles of the covenant with regard to the family needs of Commonwealth soldiers?

Caroline Nokes: Well, of course. I think I have already indicated that we have to look at the needs not only of service personnel and former service personnel but their families when considering our obligations under the covenant.

As the subject of today’s debate is families of commonwealth soldiers, I trust that hon. Members will find it helpful if I set out some of the Government’s policy background. From December 2013, a dedicated part of the immigration rules known as “Appendix Armed Forces” was introduced. As the name suggests, it was developed especially for the family members of those who had chosen to enlist as members of Her Majesty’s forces. The purpose of the change was to align dedicated routes with the broader immigration framework. It was also designed, with joint input from the MOD, to ensure that the provisions therein fulfilled our obligations under the armed forces covenant. Although the military sponsor remains exempt from immigration controls for the duration of their service, family members who come to the UK to join them are considered under the dedicated rules for Her Majesty’s forces families in “Appendix Armed Forces”.

As members of Her Majesty’s forces are regularly posted abroad and their families are rightly encouraged to accompany them, the rules make special provisions to account for that. First, a standard grant of limited leave for Her Majesty’s forces family members is for five years, rather than the 30 months that is standard for other family applications. Importantly, that saves them the cost of a second application fee. Secondly, time spent overseas on an accompanied posting is treated as time spent in the UK for immigration purposes. That means that any time spent accompanying their partner or parent on an overseas posting does not prejudice their eligibility for settlement after spending five years with limited leave. We are proud of our continuing commitment to our armed forces and their family members, including Commonwealth nationals who bravely offer their service to Her Majesty the Queen and our country. As I have indicated, I am committed to ensuring we uphold our obligations and do right by all members of the forces and their families.

As the Minister with overall responsibility for immigration matters, I am acutely aware that some of the applications received by my Department fall into what can be called the “complex cases”. I thank the hon. Gentleman for taking the trouble to set out his constituents’ cases in such detail. He will of course know that I cannot comment on the detail of individual cases on the Floor of the House. I hope he will understand that I can speak only in general terms. Without going
into specifics, I accept that applications involving families can involve a variety of reasons, as family dynamics themselves can become ever more complex. This is not isolated from marriage or relationship breakdowns, the setting up of new family units and myriad other causes.

Although I shall certainly not speak about specifics, it is important to explain some of the background. These applications can be, by their very nature, time-consuming for decision makers to consider, and I make no apology for that. Although we are striving to have more streamlined processes, we must never lose sight of the fact that one of our primary duties is the protection of the public. That is especially true when we are looking at applications made on behalf of children. In some cases, the application may not have been properly completed, or there might be gaps in the provision of the information that we require to make a sound, well-balanced decision. In some instances, it may well be that we ask for more information, or that we ask to speak to the sponsor. Such additional measures are taken only when it would assist the decision-making process and other options have been exhausted. Understandably, that might be frustrating for some sponsors or applicants, but we will do it only to safeguard the interests of the applicant. All Members will be aware that we have statutory obligations to minors and to others who may be vulnerable for other reasons. Again, I make no apology for officials being assiduous in making responsible decisions.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I are conscious of the hon. Gentleman’s point about the income threshold and how it might affect Army families. Although I stand firmly by the principle of the minimum income threshold, I reassure the hon. Gentleman that I have listened carefully to the points he has made this evening.

The Government have a proud tradition of supporting our armed forces and recognising the invaluable service that they give to the United Kingdom, and that includes Commonwealth nationals who come to the UK to serve in the forces. That is one reason why we explicitly provide for Commonwealth personnel to obtain settled status after they have discharged, enabling them to remain in the UK permanently and, if they wish, to become British citizens. We also recognise the valuable role that families play in supporting our armed forces, which is why we have immigration rules specifically for forces family members. We greatly value the contribution and sacrifices made by Commonwealth members of the forces, and their families, in ensuring the security of the UK and protecting our citizens. We want them to go on playing an important role in our armed forces, and we are committed to upholding our obligations to them.

Question put and agreed to.

8.11 pm
House adjourned.
House of Commons

Wednesday 6 March 2019

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—
Devolved Government

1. Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What progress has been made on restoring devolved government in Northern Ireland. [909557]

9. Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): What progress has been made on restoring devolved government in Northern Ireland. [909566]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): On the first day of Lent, we continue our feast in Northern Ireland business.

I am working closely with the main Northern Ireland parties to restore devolved government. I met the five main political parties on 15 February, and again—with the exception of one party—on 1 March. Northern Ireland needs a functioning Executive and Assembly, and that is what the Government are determined to achieve.

Jack Brereton: I commend my right hon. Friend’s efforts. What steps is she taking to ensure that Northern Ireland has good governance and political stability in the absence of devolved government?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend has made the important point that in the absence of Ministers at Stormont, it is incumbent on the Government to ensure that, when necessary, steps are taken to ensure that there is good governance. Yesterday we legislated to put the 2018-19 budget on a statutory footing, and today we will legislate to set the regional rates and cost-cap the renewable heat incentive scheme.

Ross Thomson: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, as in Scotland, it is vital for us to respect the need for devolution in Northern Ireland? Does she share my concern about the fact that four of the five parties in Northern Ireland want devolution to work, and only one party is holding up the process?

Karen Bradley: I think that all parties and all politicians in Northern Ireland want devolution to work. We want to find a way through this. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: there is no alternative to power-sharing devolution that is good and sustainable in the long term for the people of Northern Ireland.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The Secretary of State knows, and the whole House knows, that there was violence on the part of dissident republicans even when we had devolution. However, given yesterday’s improvised explosive devices and the link to dissident republicans, can she tell the House whether there is any prospect of the security threat level being raised, and does she have any more information about the origins of those devices?

Karen Bradley: The threat level in Northern Ireland—the level of threat from Northern Ireland-related terrorism—is “severe”, and there is currently no suggestion that it will change. I had a conversation with the Chief Constable this morning. In respect of the specific incident to which the right hon. Gentleman referred, these are the early days of an ongoing investigation, and it would not be appropriate for me to say anything further at this stage.

Nigel Dodds: I thank the Secretary of State for that information, but she will understand the concern that is out there about those devices being sent through the post. May I urge her to ensure that the lack of devolution does not hamper the introduction of any powers or resources that the Chief Constable may need in Northern Ireland—or, indeed, here on the mainland—for the purpose of combating such a terrorist threat?

Karen Bradley: I can assure the right hon. Gentleman of that. Despite the lack of a devolved Executive, we now have a fully constituted Policing Board to ensure that we have proper governance arrangements in Northern Ireland. That step was taken after the House passed the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018. However, the right hon. Gentleman is right: we need to ensure that the police have the powers that they need, throughout the United Kingdom, in order to challenge and deal with the threat of terrorism.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Given that the majority of the parties in Northern Ireland want the Assembly to be restored, would the Secretary of State consider restoring an Assembly of the willing?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend has made a good suggestion, which has also been made by a number of parties. However, the Government are steadfast in their commitment to the institutions established under the Belfast/Good Friday agreement and its successors. I want those institutions to be fully restored, and that is what I am working to achieve.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): One way in which the Secretary of State might rebuild some of the trust between the political parties that is necessary for the restoring of devolution would be to make political funding in Northern Ireland more transparent. Will she tell the House whether, and when, she will agree with the Electoral Commission, and backdate the funding legislation to 2014?

Karen Bradley: The measures that were taken in the House in respect of transparency of donations were taken with the support of the five main political parties in Northern Ireland, and with broad support across those parties. I will look carefully at the hon. Gentleman’s suggestion, but we must be clear about the need to ensure that such measures are supported in Northern Ireland.
Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The Secretary of State set herself a deadline of 26 March in the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act. Has she asked her right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to clear her diary so that she will be available to support that final push to restore devolution, as the Prime Minister was available in February 2018?

Karen Bradley: The Prime Minister takes a very keen interest in all matters in Northern Ireland; she has visited Northern Ireland on a number of occasions and regularly meets the main parties from Northern Ireland, both here in Westminster and in Northern Ireland. However, the hon. Lady is right to point out that the Act expires on 26 March and I am looking carefully at what we can do to ensure there is decision making after that date.

Business Community

2. Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What recent steps she has taken to support Northern Ireland’s business community.

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): The Secretary of State and I have frequent discussions and meetings with Northern Ireland businesses; in the last few weeks I have met Newry chamber of commerce and trade, Thales, and Willowbrook Foods, and tomorrow I will meet Bombardier. The Government have provided £3.5 million for Queen’s Belfast precision medicine centre, £700,000 for Randox diagnostics, and £1 million for Northern Ireland SME research and development. This afternoon, we will legislate to hold business rates at a 0% real-terms rise as well.

Tom Pursglove: I very much welcome that work, but what specific steps has the Minister taken to promote Northern Ireland internationally as a successful business hub and first-class place to invest?

John Penrose: The numbers speak for themselves: over 900 international companies have already invested in Northern Ireland, supported by Government investments such as the ones I have mentioned in global sectors such as biomedicine and defence. Political stability has been a key foundation of this success, which is why restoring devolved government at Stormont is critical.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): How is the Minister going to reassure the business community today, after the very serious warning by the head of the Northern Ireland civil service, David Sterling, that there will be grave consequences if we have a no-deal Brexit?

John Penrose: I think a number of people will have raised their eyebrows at such politically charged comments from a civil servant. The point I would make is simply this: we have a meaningful vote coming up in this place next week where the Attorney General and the Prime Minister will be able to come back and tell us the fruits of their discussions in Brussels. The simple answer to avoiding any of the scenarios that people may or may not agree with which were being painted by David Sterling is to find a deal that will work and which therefore means we will not be in no-deal territory. That will, I hope, solve the problem for everybody.

Dr Andrew Murray (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Is the Minister concerned about the possible impact on small businesses of the changes proposed to non-domestic rates in the legislation that are about to consider, and is he particularly cautious about advice he may be receiving from the energy Department, because it was that that Department that got us into this fix in the first place?

John Penrose: Without wanting to prejudge this afternoon’s debate—as my hon. Friend the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee Chairman has said, we will be going through this in a lot more detail—he is absolutely right that the renewable heat incentive scheme has been the subject of a great deal of concerned commentary, because it has dramatically broken its budgets and is not a sustainable solution. I think everybody is treating any proposals with a great degree of concern and scrutiny because of that history, and I am sure we will have a chance to go through it in more detail, and we will try to ensure that any proposals that are legislated on do not suffer from the faults that existed in the previous version.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I have been married to a lady from County Armagh for quite some time. [Hon. Members: “Hear, hear.”] Through my marriage I have come to know the image of Northern Irish food products, such as Black Bush, Tayto crisps and Flanagan’s most excellent sausage from the city of Armagh. Do the Government agree that marketing Northern Ireland’s special food could be one way to boost business in Northern Ireland, not just within the UK but to a world market?

John Penrose: Something that Britain and the UK have cottoned on to later than many other parts of the world is the notion of local food and its marketability, along with our ability to forge a local brand not just for food but for tourism more broadly as well. In congratulating the hon. Gentleman on his marital status, and his success in that regard, I am sure he is on to something important as well.

Mr Speaker: No reason to doubt that at all.

Leaving the EU: No-Deal Preparations

4. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What support the Government is providing to Northern Ireland for preparations for the UK leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement.

5. Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): What support the Government is providing to Northern Ireland for preparations for the UK leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): Leaving with a deal on 29 March is our clear objective, and that is what we are working towards. It remains, however, the responsibility of the UK Government to continue preparations for the full range of potential outcomes, including no deal. As we do so, and as decisions are made, we will take full account of the unique circumstances of Northern Ireland.
Karen Bradley: The Northern Ireland civil service is working incredibly hard on no-deal preparedness. My officials hold regular meetings with civil servants in Northern Ireland. It would be better if we had devolved government, because there would be Ministers to whom those civil servants would be accountable, but I repeat that the best way to ensure that we do not need any of this preparedness is to vote for the deal.

Mr Speaker: Indeed.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Yesterday’s letter from David Sterling, the head of the Northern Ireland civil service, gave the honest assessment that it was apparent that businesses in Northern Ireland were not adequately prepared for a no-deal Brexit. Who could possibly blame Northern Irish businesses for that, if the UK Government are not prepared either? Just ask the Transport Secretary. Given this stark advice, why will the Secretary of State not support the calls to take no deal off the negotiating table now?

Karen Bradley: I disagree with the hon. Gentleman, for whom I have enormous respect, when he says that the Government are not prepared for no deal. We are working towards preparing for all eventual outcomes, but we want to leave the European Union with a deal. We want to ensure that we respect the result of the referendum and leave with a deal, and the best way to do that is to vote for the deal.

Mr Speaker: Yes indeed.

Northern Ireland Assembly: Re-establishment

5. Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): What progress has been made towards the re-establishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): We debated this point at some length in the Northern Ireland Budget (Anticipation and Adjustments) (No. 2) Bill yesterday, and the frustration from all sides at the lack of a Northern Ireland Executive was palpable. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State mentioned earlier, she has met representatives of the five main political parties in Northern Ireland and the Irish Government recently, and I can confirm that discussions have been ongoing since then.

Christian Matheson: Does the Minister share my concern at the increasing polarisation of politics in the UK, and particularly in Northern Ireland? Is he satisfied that there is sufficient diversity and pluralism within political representation there to make the re-establishment of the Assembly a success?

John Penrose: We elect the politicians we deserve. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that there are periodic calls for a greater variety of representation and range of representation in this Parliament and, I am sure, in Stormont. The difficulty in Northern Ireland is that Northern Ireland’s politics has been far more polarised for a long time. We are trying, collectively, on all sides, to usher it back towards the centre ground and co-operation at least.
David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Will the Minister acknowledge that the lack in re-establishing the Assembly is not down to this party? This party does not have red lines; one party is causing the difficulty, and that is Sinn Féin. Will the Minister acknowledge that?

John Penrose: I will quote the Labour party spokesman, who said yesterday that the existence of preconditions or red lines was frequently a facet of talks processes. The point is to get a process that allows us to overcome those preconditions. If we allow ourselves to be sidetracked in the first place by their existence, we will never get anywhere towards succeeding.

Stormont House Agreement: Legacy

6. Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): What steps she is taking to ensure that the process for addressing the legacy of Northern Ireland’s past commands public confidence and delivers on the objectives of the Stormont House Agreement. [R] [909563]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): The Government are carefully considering over 17,000 responses to the recent consultation on legacy. We are determined to replace the current system with one that is fair, balanced and proportionate, and which commands widespread support.

Dan Jarvis: I thank the Secretary of State for her reply. She knows that our ability to secure a lasting peace depends on the support of all the communities involved. Will she assure the House that, when working to address the legacy of Northern Ireland’s past, she will be considerate of our Army and armed forces veterans, many of whom are now pensioners?

Karen Bradley: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I am grateful to him, as we have been able to speak personally about this matter, and to hear his words of advice and wisdom, because he has great experience and expertise in this area, and I value his contribution. I want to ensure that what we take forward and legislate for—something that has been needed since the 1998 Belfast agreement—commands widespread support. It has to command support in this House, in the other place and in Northern Ireland, and it absolutely has to work for our veterans.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Well over 90% of the murders and injuries caused during the troubles in Northern Ireland were caused by acts of terrorism. Very few prosecutions and investigations are under way and innocent victims are being left behind, with thousands of unsolved cases. When will the Secretary of State address that issue and put in place a mechanism to investigate the acts of terrorism—over 90%—that caused those murders and injuries?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady sets out the figures very powerfully—over 90% of the killings during the troubles were at the hands of terrorists. Every single one of those was a crime. The under 10% that were at the hands of the military and police were not crimes; they were people acting under orders and instructions, fulfilling their duties in a dignified and appropriate way. I look forward to working with her more to ensure that we can deliver the much-needed reforms and changes that we all want to see—[ Interruption. ]

Mr Speaker: Order. I very much hope that the hon. Member for Barnsley Central is not indisposed. It is most irregular to beetle out of the Chamber before the exchanges on the question have concluded. The hon. Gentleman is normally the very embodiment of courtesy, so if he is not feeling well, I hope he gets well soon; if he is well, he had better get back into the Chamber sooner rather than later. It is an elementary rule that new Members must grasp: do not leave the Chamber until the exchanges on your question have been completed. I am sure you are all interested in the views that other people wish to express as well as in your own. I am sure I can say that without fear of contradiction.

EU Withdrawal Agreement: Backstop Protocol

7. Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the backstop protocol in the EU Withdrawal Agreement. [909564]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): My right hon. Friend asks what discussions the Secretary of State has had with Cabinet colleagues about the Irish backstop. The short answer is, a lot. The country and this Parliament seem to have been discussing little else for weeks, and it is the same with knobs on for the Cabinet.

Sir Edward Leigh: Surely, never has something so important, namely Brexit, been put at risk in preventing something that will never happen, namely a hard border in Northern Ireland. Why will the EU, the Irish Republic and the United Kingdom Government simply not attach an instrument to the withdrawal agreement, making it clear that we will never impose a hard border in Northern Ireland? That can be achieved in time and with good will, first with customs arrangements, then with a free trade deal backed by technology. It is so simple—let us do it.

John Penrose: My right hon. Friend raises a creative potential legal solution, which he discussed in an Adjournment debate two weeks ago. The whole House will know that the Attorney General is currently involved in detailed negotiations on how to modify the backstop in line with Parliament’s wishes. Ultimately, it must be for him to judge whether my right hon. Friend’s proposal gets him closer to a legally effective solution that will allow him to change his advice. I will make sure that the Attorney General is aware of the proposal so that he can incorporate it if it is worth while.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): From the Minister’s discussions with ministerial colleagues, can he indicate whether they are indicating to him that, at this very late stage in our discussions with the European Union, a sliver of light is beginning to emerge that the EU understands the need for a fundamental change to the backstop?

John Penrose: I suspect that is well above my pay grade. I am sure we would all want to hear what the Attorney General and the Prime Minister have to say when it comes to the meaningful vote next Tuesday.

Security Situation

10. Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the security situation in Northern Ireland. [909568]
The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): The threat from dissident republican terrorism continues to be severe in Northern Ireland. This Government’s first priority is to keep people safe and secure. Vigilance against this continuing threat is essential, and we remain determined to ensure that terrorism never succeeds.

Mr Jayawardena: Can my right hon. Friend shed light on reports in The Times that my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary plans to bring forward a limit on the prosecution of veterans in the Queen’s Speech? As my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) argued in The Daily Telegraph, we must stop gesture politics and start delivering natural justice.

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend should not believe everything he reads in the newspaper. I assure him that I am working closely with the Defence Secretary, the Attorney General and Members on both sides of the House to ensure we can deliver a new system that works for the people of Northern Ireland, that works for the victims of terrorism and, very importantly, that works for our veterans and retired police officers.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Where are we with the European arrest warrant in three weeks’ time?

Karen Bradley: The way to guarantee that the European arrest warrant continues in three weeks’ time is to vote for the deal.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): There has been a bomb attack in Londonderry; there have been various shootings across Northern Ireland; and we had three parcel bombs at Heathrow airport, London City airport and Waterloo station yesterday originating from the Republic of Ireland—at least the postage did. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with her equivalents in the Republic of Ireland to address these issues, which clearly show that the Republic of Ireland is a haven for terrorists?

Karen Bradley: We discussed the matters of cross-border security and east-west relations at both British-Irish Intergovernmental Conferences in the past 12 months. Close work between the Garda and the Police Service of Northern Ireland is imperative to ensuring the safety of us all.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Would the Secretary of State care to take the opportunity from the Dispatch Box to thank my constituent Alastair Hamilton, the soon to be former head of Invest Northern Ireland, for the 10 years of great service he has given to Northern Ireland in attracting the highest levels of inward investment our country has ever seen?

Karen Bradley: I am sure the hon. Gentleman is referring to the contribution that investment has made to the security of Northern Ireland, and he will notice that I have my Invest NI pen with me.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The idea that the European arrest warrant should be left to the lottery of whether the Prime Minister gets her legislation through simply cannot be in the interests of the people of this country. Will the Secretary of State now get a grip, talk to the Prime Minister and insist that we get the European arrest warrant sorted, irrespective of the outcomes in this House next week?

Karen Bradley: I want to see access to the European arrest warrant, or a similar instrument, continue into the future. As a Minister in the Home Office, I worked very hard to ensure that we have access to the European arrest warrant as a United Kingdom, and I want to see it continue, but I gently remind the hon. Gentleman that there is a mechanism to ensure all these matters continue, and that is the withdrawal agreement—that means voting for the deal. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Before I call the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) to ask his second question, let me say that a lot of noisy private conversations are taking place, including on the Government Benches, where I am sure Members wish to listen to their illustrious Secretary of State as she replies to the inquiries put to her.

Tony Lloyd: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Secretary of State knows that the security situation also depends on trust. When David Cameron was Prime Minister, he recognised the special circumstances of the Pat Finucane case and established an independent inquiry into those circumstances. The Supreme Court decided last week that that was a flawed process. What remedy does the Secretary of State propose, unless it is indeed a second public inquiry?

Karen Bradley: The judgment from the Supreme Court on the Pat Finucane case came out last week. It is a complicated matter, because although the judgment says that the article 2 obligations on the Government have not been thoroughly fulfilled, it does not suggest the next stage forward. I am looking carefully at the judgment and considering the next steps.

UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

12. Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): What steps she is taking in response to concerns raised by Northern Ireland’s women’s sector representatives at the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

Karen Bradley: The Government recognise the sensitivity of this issue and the range of views expressed by stakeholders on all sides of the debate. We take our obligations under the convention seriously, including having had positive dialogues with the committee very recently.

Alison Thewliss: On 25 February, at CEDAW, the Women’s Aid Federation Northern Ireland raised a series of concerns, including on the lack of a gender equality strategy and a violence against women strategy, on a gendered approach to post-conflict transition not being applied and on the disproportionate impact of UK Government policies such as the two-child policy...
The death of anyone through an act of violence is an appalling tragedy. A growing number of young people have lost their lives in a cycle of mindless violence that has shocked us all. Our thoughts and prayers are with the friends and families of all the victims. The responsibility for these crimes lies with the perpetrators of them, but we must all do more to ensure that justice is served and to tackle the root causes of this violence so that we can bring it to an end and ensure the safety of our young people. I will be holding a summit in No. 10 in the coming days to bring together Ministers, community leaders, agencies and others, and I will also be meeting the victims of these appalling crimes to listen to their stories and explore what more we can do as a whole society to tackle this problem.

I am sure the whole House will want to join me in paying tribute to Professor Lord Bhattacharyya who died, sadly, last week. His creation of the Warwick Manufacturing Group was truly a pioneering partnership between academia and industry. Our thoughts are with his family and friends, and I know he will be sorely missed.

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

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Today sees the start of Lent, traditionally a time of abstinence and giving things up. Recently, it has become a season of doing something new and positive. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it would do our national soul some good if we all took up voting with the Government to leave the EU with her good deal and in an orderly fashion on 29 March?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend, who has put forward a positive suggestion for Members of this House, during Lent, to vote with the Government in the meaningful vote. Then, of course, across the House we would all be able to give up being a member of the European Union on 29 March.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in paying tribute to Lord Bhattacharyya, who died last week. As she said, he was a champion of the car industry and manufacturing in general, and he played a key role in saving Jaguar Land Rover, not only safeguarding jobs but, crucially, ensuring that international research is done in the UK. We thank him for everything he did.
Tomorrow is International Women’s Day, and I am delighted that for the Opposition the debate will be opened by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby), who is herself the daughter of people from the Windrush generation. We will be making the case for closing the gender pay gap, as we are determined to improve the lot of women in our society. In that vein, may I congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) on giving birth to a son this morning?

I join the Prime Minister in sending our thoughts and prayers to the families of those who have lost young people. Yousef Makki and Jodie Chesney, both 17 years old, were the ninth and 10th teenagers murdered already this year. Two hundred and eighty-five people have been stabbed to death in the past year—the highest level ever. I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister has announced that Cobra is being convened, but what extra funding is being provided to address the root causes of both knife crime and the increasing levels of violent crime on the streets of all our towns and cities?

The Prime Minister: First, I join the right hon. Gentleman in congratulating the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) on the birth of her son. We are all pleased to hear that that has gone well. In relation to International Women’s Day, I am pleased that today marks the launch of the book by his hon. Friend, the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), “Women of Westminster: The MPs Who Changed Politics”. I hope that that book will be an inspiration to other women to come into politics and have a career in this House. I congratulate the England women’s football team, who last night won the SheBelieves cup, defeating Japan in doing so.

The right hon. Gentleman raises the specific question of knife crime, which I referred to in my opening comments. Of course, as I said, any death of a young person through an act of violence is a terrible tragedy, and we have seen too many young lives—too many lives of promise and potential—being cut short. Responsibility for these terrible crimes does lie with the perpetrators, and we will always stand with the victims to ensure that criminals are brought to justice. We will defeat the scourge of violence only if we understand and address its complex root causes. Yes, that does mean ensuring that all agencies, including the police, have the right resources and powers to do their jobs. It means tackling the drug crime that is fuelling gang violence in our cities and exporting it across the country, and it means intervening at every stage to turn young people away from violence, and that is exactly what the Government are doing.

Jeremy Corbyn: Many of us in this House will have sat in the living rooms of homes where a young person has lost their life through knife crime and will never forget that experience and never forget that feeling of hopelessness and loss that those families are going through. We owe it to those families and those young people who have lost their lives to do far more about knife crime and far more about ensuring that there are sufficient resources for the police to deal with it. Sara Thornton of the National Police Chiefs Council said:

“We think we need much stronger leadership from Government...and there needs to be more funding.”

The Metropolitan Police Commissioner said yesterday that, of course, “there is some link between violent crime on the streets...and police numbers.”

A total of 21,000 police officers’ jobs have been cut. Violent crime is at the highest level since comparative records began. If there are sufficient police numbers, can the Prime Minister please explain why, yesterday, the Defence Secretary was offering to send in the military to assist with knife crime?

The Prime Minister: The Metropolitan Police Commissioner has recognised that the causes of knife crime are complex, and she has said:

“The police alone won’t sort this issue out, we can’t arrest our way out of this problem.”

I agree, which is why we need to tackle it across a number of fronts. We must continue to enforce the laws that bear down on violent crime. That involves the Offensive Weapons Bill in which we introduced the knife crime prevention orders. Those orders were asked for by the police, and we are introducing them. We will intervene early to stop young people going down into a life of crime and becoming involved in crime. We have published the serious violence strategy, and the serious violence taskforce is working. We have also put £200 million into the youth endowment fund, and our early intervention youth fund has already funded 29 projects working with police and crime commissioners. We do ensure that police have the right resources: £460 million more is available this year and nearly double that—nearly £1 billion extra—is available next year. We also need to ensure that we understand the different use and misuse of drugs that is fuelling much of this crime. That is why my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has set up the independent drugs misuse review, which will be led by Dame Carol Black.

Jeremy Corbyn: The police clearly do not have the resources to deal with the problem: safer neighbourhood teams have been cut and community police officers have been cut. Many areas see no police officers at all. There is nobody to supervise these special orders that the Prime Minister is talking about. Perhaps she will listen to Nazir Afzal, the former chief prosecutor of Greater Manchester. Tragically, his 17-year-old relative was recently stabbed to death in Birmingham. He said:

“When you reduce police numbers by 21,000...there isn’t the intelligence any more, there isn’t the neighbour policing any more”.

Does the Prime Minister now regret the cuts in police numbers, and in this review will she undertake to restore them to their former level?

The Prime Minister: As I have just indicated, we are putting more resources into the police. It is no good Opposition Members standing up saying, “No, you’re not.” It is a fact that more money is being put into the police this year and that more money is being put into the police next year. The real question is not are we putting more money into the police, because we are, but why did the Labour party oppose that money going into the police.

Jeremy Corbyn: Violent crime has doubled under the Tories’ watch. I have had a letter from Mike in Gosport—

[Interruption.] Yes, it is important; he has something to say. Mike says:
The Prime Minister: As we make more resources available to the police, they are available to forces across the country, including Hampshire. Of course we look at the powers and resources that the police need. That is why we are not just putting more resources in, but increasing the powers that the police have. We introduced knife crime prevention orders in the Offensive Weapons Bill. That is an important step, which we have taken because the police asked us to. If the right hon. Gentleman wants the police to be able to do their job on the streets, he needs to tell this House why he voted against the measures we introduced to increase the powers of the police to deal with those carrying knives and to apply custodial sentences in the cases of those who are caught twice carrying knives.

Jeremy Corbyn: Crime went down when Labour was in office. We increased the numbers of police officers and the safer neighbourhood teams. Police officers are telling me that there are simply not enough of them to do the job. Hampshire alone has lost 1,000 police officers, and its funding has been cut by £70 million. Does the Prime Minister understand the scale of need here?

The Local Government Association says that local services face a funding gap of £3.2 billion this year. By the way, that is double—in one year alone—what the stronger towns fund is offering over seven years. The number of rapes, murders and other serious crimes committed by offenders on parole has risen by more than 50% since the privatisation of the probation service was introduced four years ago. At least one company wrongly classified offenders as low risk in order to meet Government targets. Do the Government now accept that privatising the probation service to profit-making companies has been a disaster that should be reversed, and that the probation service should be brought back completely into the public service?

The Prime Minister: When we are looking at issues of probation, we want to ensure that we are genuinely reducing the level of reoffending. That is about a rehabilitation method that looks at a variety of issues, including the home of an individual coming out of prison, their employment and their relationship with their family. This was not done fully under the last Labour Government, which is why we saw such a high level of reoffending rates and it is why we need to take action. The right hon. Gentleman keeps raising these issues, and I welcome the fact that he is accepting that dealing with serious violence and knife crime requires us to act across a number of areas. For example, it is about the work that we are doing with young people, and supporting intervention in hospital accident and emergency departments. We are expanding our support to the charity Redthread, which has introduced its youth violence intervention work in hospitals in Birmingham and Nottingham, as well as in London. We are also supporting the £3.6 million national county lines co-ordination centre.

In just two separate weeks of law enforcement action, we have seen more than 1,000 arrests and 1,300 individuals being safeguarded. We commend all the police officers and other agencies involved in that work. The Government are giving them the support that they need to do their job.

Jeremy Corbyn: The problem is that violent crime has doubled. The rise has been driven by austerity—something that the Prime Minister told us a few months ago was over. Cuts to police and rising poverty; the police and the Home Office recognise the link, even if the Prime Minister does not. But the issues are wider: the privatisation of the probation service has been a disaster; mental health services are under-resourced; youth and children’s services are in crisis; more than 600 youth centres have been closed; 3,500 youth workers have lost their jobs; funding for colleges and schools has been cut; and exclusions are rising. The public services that were there to support young people have been systematically stripped away, and everyone can see the consequences. Can the Prime Minister not recognise that there has to be a holistic response? We cannot keep communities safe on the cheap, with cuts and privatisation. We have to invest in all our communities in every part of this country—something that this Government are incapable of doing.

The Prime Minister: We put more money into our local authorities; the right hon. Gentleman voted against it. We put more money into our police—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is a very discordant noise from Opposition Back Benchers. The question has been asked—and, broadly speaking, heard—and the answer will be heard.

The Prime Minister: We have put more money into our schools—£2.6 billion over these two years. We are putting more money into our local authorities—£1.3 billion next year, voted against by the right hon. Gentleman and the Labour party—and more money into our police: nearly £1 billion extra available to them next year, voted against by the right hon. Gentleman and the Labour party.

The right hon. Gentleman stands up here and talks about austerity. If he is that concerned about austerity, you would think that he would want to make sure that it could never, ever happen again. Let us remember why we had to take those measures—because of the state of the economy left by the Labour party. But what would his policies mean? Higher borrowing, higher taxes, crashing our economy, less money for our public services—he would take us right back to austerity, square one.

Q8. [909629] Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Across the country, freeholders and leaseholders are being ripped off by management companies charging excessive service charges, often for services they do not require. Many of these people are vulnerable pensioners who are trapped in McCarthy & Stone properties with their asset depreciating thanks to the dominant involvement of FirstPort and Vincent Tchenguiz. May I ask the
Prime Minister for two reforms: first, ground rents at peppercorn levels for retirement homes; and secondly, bringing in a charging schedule and an automatic re-tendering process so that all freeholders and long lease holders can bid with their own community interest companies to deliver services that they actually require?

The Prime Minister: I recognise that this is an issue of real concern to many constituents. That is why we have committed to clamping down on those agents who abuse the system and protecting leaseholders and renters who are suffering at the hands of rogue agents, every day, from unexpected costs or from poor-quality repairs for excessive fees. We have asked Lord Best to chair a working group to look at regulating and professionalising property agents that will include reviewing the standards around the transparency of service charges and other fees and charges—how they are presented to consumers—and putting them into a statutory code for managing agents. But I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Communities Secretary will have heard the issue that my hon. Friend has raised and be happy to meet him to discuss this further.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Tove Macdonald is 87 years old. She was brought up under Nazi occupation in Denmark. She has lived in Scotland for 59 years. Why, Prime Minister, is she being forced to register in a country she has called home for almost the last 60 years?

The Prime Minister: We want to ensure that EU citizens who are living here have their rights protected. We want to be able to ensure that they have the necessary support that they need and, indeed, the recognition of their status here in the United Kingdom. If the right hon. Gentleman is interested in defending and protecting the rights of EU citizens here in this country, then I hope he will vote for the deal, which does exactly that.

Ian Blackford: What a disgrace—a woman who has lived here for almost 60 years, and the Prime Minister wants her to register to stay here. Tove has children. She has grandchildren. She has married in Scotland. She has friends here. She has built her life here. Why is the Prime Minister making Tove register after almost 60 years? Will she end this heartless policy? Will she tell Tove to register after almost 60 years?

The Prime Minister: The case that my hon. Friend raises is one of great concern, and I know that Members across the House will want to join me in sending our sincerest sympathies to Breck’s family. I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Breck’s mother for her brave and powerful campaigning on the wider issue of internet grooming.

The Ministry of Justice has assured me that it is urgently looking into this issue, and I am sure it will update my hon. Friend as soon as possible. I agree with him; we want social media companies to recognise the responsibility they have and to work with law enforcement agencies. I know that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has written to my hon. Friend, to meet him and hear more from the family. It has become increasingly difficult for UK law enforcement to access data containing information on threats to UK public safety if it is held or controlled in other countries. That is why the Government recently legislated—we passed the Crime (Overseas Production Orders) Act 2019, which will give law enforcement agencies the power to obtain electronic data controlled by providers outside the UK where an international agreement is in place. He mentioned the United States; we expect to establish the first such agreement with the United States.

Q11. [909632] Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Five years ago, my constituent Barry Bednar’s 14-year-old son Breck was brutally raped and murdered. The perpetrator is now serving a 25-year prison sentence. However, in recent months, the victim’s family, including his teenage sister, have received repeated distressing and disturbing communications on Snapchat purporting to be from the perpetrator, graphically recounting the circumstances of the murder. The police have asked Snapchat to provide the data that would help them definitively identify who has been sending those messages—for example, data about the device from which the messages were sent—but Snapchat is referring the police to a mutual legal assistance treaty with the United States, and the police would have to go through a one-year process to get that vital data for their investigation. Does the Prime Minister agree that that is completely unacceptable? Will she join me in calling on Snapchat and other social media companies to promptly co-operate with police inquiries? If they do not do so, does she agree that legislation is required?

The Prime Minister: The case that my hon. Friend raises is one of great concern, and I know that Members across the House will want to join me in sending our sincerest sympathies to Breck’s family. I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Breck’s mother for her brave and powerful campaigning on the wider issue of internet grooming.

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Q3. [909624] Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): As I raised with the Prime Minister a couple of weeks ago, Conservative Governments have taken £6 billion out of the north-east since 2010. The Government now propose to give back £15 million a year over seven years through the stronger towns fund. At that rate of repayment, can the Prime Minister tell the House by which century the moneys owed to the north-east will be repaid?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman knows full well, we have been investing in the north of England. We have been investing in transport across the north of England. We have been investing in our public services. We are investing in the health service, and the north-east will benefit from that as well. Since 2010, in the north-east, there are over 35,000 more small businesses, more than 18,000 new affordable homes, and over 305,000 children
are in good or outstanding schools. That shows that the hard work of this Government is paying off, and the people of the north-east are benefiting.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Earlier this week, the owners of the Westgate shopping centre in Basildon terminated Smart Parking’s contract after a disastrous nine months of operation. I have now discovered that Smart Parking has signed a shared business services agreement with the NHS. May I ask my right hon. Friend to ensure that, before any contracts are signed, the Department of Health and Social Care fully researches the impact that the practices of Smart Parking would have on its users, customers, clients and staff?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, my hon. Friend has raised an important issue, and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care will be happy to meet him to discuss this further.

Q4. [909625] Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Amidst the noise of the Brexit debate, there is a real risk that we lose sight of the reasons why so many people voted to leave in the first place. I think that if we want to restore faith and trust, we need to devolve more political decision making away from Whitehall and closer to the people who will be affected by those decisions. Following on from the very constructive meeting that took place at Fountains Abbey in north Yorkshire with the Housing, Communities and Local Government Secretary and Yorkshire leaders on Friday, may I ask the Prime Minister personally to engage with the substance of the One Yorkshire devolution deal with a view to reaching an agreement that will best serve the interests of the people of Yorkshire? [R]

The Prime Minister: I think the hon. Gentleman is a living example of devolution of powers from Whitehall out to the areas through the mayorality that he is serving. We recognise the discussion and debate there has been on the issue of Yorkshire devolution. The One Yorkshire proposals did not meet our criteria for devolution, but my right hon. Friend the Communities Secretary has met Yorkshire leaders and discussions are continuing. However, the priority remains the implementation of the agreed Sheffield city region deal, which will bring £900 million of investment to the local area, which I am sure the hon. Gentleman will welcome.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): It was with profound sadness that I saw my constituency this week join the all-too-long list of areas across our country to have lost a precious young person to knife crime. The public do not want to see politicians throw blame at one another for these stolen lives; they want to see them take responsibility for what is within their control, provide resource if resource is necessary and then demonstrate a relentless and total commitment to snuffing out violent crime. I welcome the announcement of an emergency summit, but what action will the Prime Minister be taking after that constantly to drive performance on these issues until we get the result the public rightly demand—to keep children safe?

The Prime Minister: May I say to my hon. Friend, as I did earlier, that any death of a young person at the hands of violence is a terrible tragedy? I recognise, as she says, that her constituency has seen just one of the latest examples of a young life cut short far too early. I also say to her that, yes, as I said, what we are doing is bringing together Ministers, local government, police and others—other agencies. This needs to be a cross-society approach to deal with this issue, because it is not just about catching the perpetrators of the crime; it is about preventing the crime from taking place in the first place.

That is one of the reasons why the Government will be launching a consultation on addressing this as a public health issue. There has been excellent work done under what was Strathclyde police force, now Police Scotland, looking at and using the public health approach. What that does is ensure that all agencies—not just across Government, but in local government and elsewhere—are able to be brought together to deal with this issue. What I want to do at that summit is to hear directly from those agencies what further action the Government can take, which we can then put in place to deal with the issue.

Q5. [909626] Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): It is my daughter’s 16th birthday on 29 March, and it is her generation that will be most impacted by Brexit. Perhaps the Prime Minister could give her an early birthday present, and delay Brexit until she has informed the House about the status of the police and National Crime Agency investigations after Vote Leave and Leave.EU were found guilty of corrupt activities by the Electoral Commission.

The Prime Minister: I think the hon. Lady has discussed the issue of delaying Brexit with me before, and I just simply say to her that this Parliament gave the people of the United Kingdom the decision to choose whether to leave the European Union or to stay in. They chose to leave the European Union. I think for trust in politics it is important that the Government deliver on just that.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): Mr Speaker, you are right that the former Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull is very welcome here today. As he said in a lecture last night:

“If a state-sponsored adversary has enduring access to staff, software or hardware deployed into a target telecommunication network, then they only require the intent to act in order to conduct operations within the network.”

Given that Chinese law obliges all Chinese companies to assist the Chinese intelligence services, will the Prime Minister explain what the implications are for British Government policy?

The Prime Minister: We look at these issues very seriously. As regards the issue of 5G security, we are looking at the right approach that we need to take. We want to be able to benefit from that new technology, but of course we need to manage the risks closely and we are considering a full range of policy options. Our review into 5G is still ongoing and no decisions have been taken.

Q6. [909627] Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): In January, 83% of Scottish MPs voted against the Prime Minister’s deal. Last night, an historic vote took place in the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament, with both Parliaments simultaneously rejecting the
Prime Minister’s deal. Is it not the case that the Prime Minister has no mandate from Scotland either for no deal or for her deal?

The Prime Minister: We entered the European Union as the United Kingdom; we will leave the European Union as the United Kingdom. I also say to the hon. Lady that the SNP has no mandate from the Scottish people to continue to pursue independence. [Interruption]

Mr Speaker: Order. Calm! [Interruption] Difference of opinion is the essence of politics. There is an elaborate combination of finger wagging and head shaking going on, which may be personally therapeutic but is institutionally disadvantageous. In any case, we owe the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) a decent hearing. I call Rebecca Pow.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Mr Speaker, I am not sure who is in charge of the washing machine in your house, but were you aware that every time you, I or anyone else puts a load of washing on, 700,000 tiny microfibres get washed down the drain and into the marine environment, causing untold damage?

Mr Speaker: It is a shared responsibility.

Rebecca Pow: The 68 million loads of washing done in the UK every week contribute a staggering 9.4 trillion microfibres to the environment. As many colleagues, including me, try to reduce their plastics use for Lent, in a campaign masterminded by my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), will the Prime Minister agree that this is a great time to address the issue and carry on this Government’s great record on the environment?

Mr Speaker: I think that by now the wash would have been completed. [Laughter.]

The Prime Minister: Despite the laughter, my hon. Friend has raised a very important issue. May I thank her for continuing to be a champion of our environment? She did an enormous amount of work that led to the Government ban on microbeads, and she is now raising the issue of microfibres. She mentions that Members across this House are seeking to reduce their use of plastic during Lent, in a campaign masterminded by my hon. Friend for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), will the Prime Minister agree that this is a great time to address the issue and carry on this Government’s great record on the environment?

Mr Speaker: I think that by now the wash would have been completed. [Laughter.]

The Prime Minister: Obviously, the hon. Lady raises what sounds like a very distressing individual case. I will ensure that he receives a genuine review and an urgent delay of the loan charge, right hon. Friend now personally intervene to ensure a genuine review and an urgent delay of the loan charge, so that the review, as promised, can be carried out?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an issue which is of concern not only to his constituents but others’ across the House. I will ensure that he receives a response from the Treasury that sets out exactly what is being done in the review that is taking place.
Q10. [909631] Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Last Saturday morning, with three colleagues, I met the heads and governors of Gloucester schools. Each school outlined the impact of education cuts on their particular establishment, but they agreed on one thing: the Prime Minister could make a real difference now with regard to special educational needs. I hope the Government will consider this. First, will the Government make sure that the additional needs budget is fully ring-fenced and invested in schools, rather than lost somewhere on the way? Secondly, will the Government take away the ridiculous and perverse incentive whereby the first £6,000 for any education, health and care plan has to be found by the school itself? If that were to be done, it would make a dramatic difference to our schools. I raised that in a debate on Monday, but unfortunately the Education Minister was unable to confirm. Will the Prime Minister confirm that the Government will look into that and do something about it?

The Prime Minister: We recognise we have asked schools to do more. That is why we recently announced an extra £350 million to support children with complex special educational needs. That total includes an extra £250 million into the high needs budget across this year and next. That builds on the £6 billion in place for this year, the highest level on record. We have also put in an extra £100 million to create new school places to improve existing facilities for children with special educational needs and disabilities. That takes our total investment on that to £365 million through to 2021. The hon. Gentleman raises the question of the money actually going direct to the schools. I suggest that he needs to sit down—I am sure he has—with the local authority and discuss with it how it is using the money that is being made available to it.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): This week marks the beginning of Brain Tumour Awareness Month, and I bring the House’s attention to the event that is happening immediately after Prime Minister’s questions in Westminster Hall. Good progress is being made to find the right care and cure for people who have brain tumours, but will the right hon. Friend meet me and others to discuss how we can improve the life chances of children and young people who survive a brain tumour but are left with brain injuries? Essential therapies and support for children and young people in this situation is not consistent and often lacking, leaving them with significantly impaired life chances.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important issue and I thank the all-party group on brain tumours for all the work that it has done on this issue. It is essential to recognise the needs of parents and carers of children to ensure that the right support is in place when and where they need it. That is why those diagnosed with cancer, including children with brain cancer, will be benefiting from a tailored recovery package, individually designed to help them to live well with and beyond cancer. As my hon. Friend mentions, not just dealing with the cancer, but thereafter is an important element of this. NHS England is accelerating the roll-out to ensure full implementation by 2020, as recommended by the independent cancer taskforce. I understand that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care will be going directly to the event that my hon. Friend refers to, and I am sure that the appropriate Minister in the Department for Health and Social Care will be happy to meet to go through this in detail.

Q12. [909633] Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): The Prime Minister will be aware of our concerns about attempts to prosecute members of the security forces who conscientiously and courageously defended all the people of Northern Ireland against terrorism. Will she assure me that any proposal to provide greater legal protection for our armed forces will include those who served in Northern Ireland?

The Prime Minister: We have been clear that the current system for dealing with the legacy of Northern Ireland’s past is not working well for anyone. Around 3,500 people were killed in the troubles; 90% were murdered by terrorists. Many of these cases require further investigation, including the deaths of hundreds of members of the security forces. The system to investigate the past does need to change to provide better outcomes for victims and survivors of the troubles, but also to ensure that our armed forces and police officers are not unfairly treated. That is why we are working across Government on proposals to see how best we can move forward. We are carefully considering the very large number of responses that we received to the consultation on this issue. We will be publishing our next steps in due course and the MOD is looking at what more can be done to ensure that service personnel are not unfairly pursued through the courts, including considering legislation.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): The SNP Scottish Government have resurrected Alex Salmond’s call for a Scottish currency. Does the Prime Minister agree that this is reckless and risks destabilising the Scottish economy?

The Prime Minister: I seem to recall that, back in the 2014 referendum, the SNP were absolutely adamant that Scotland would keep the pound. There have been a few changes since then. They have looked at the option of the euro, then they went back to sterling, and now they are into an independent currency. This Government are working to secure a Brexit deal that protects jobs and our economy. The SNP should focus on that rather than continue to pursue their independence fantasy.

Q13. [909634] Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The Department for Work and Pensions is currently carrying out five reviews into disabled people wrongly deprived of social security support because of the flawed personal independence payment assessment. My constituent, Mr Delaurentis, was given just zero points despite being unable to prepare food for himself or even dress himself. We have recently learnt that over 4,000 people were wrongly deprived of their disability living allowance when reassessed for PIP. Seventeen thousand people have died before their PIP decision was reached, and over 72% of cases that go to an appeal tribunal are overturned in favour of the claimant, so when will the Prime Minister follow Labour’s policy and scrap this discredited and flawed PIP assessment framework?

Mr Speaker: May I gently say to colleagues that I am trying to accommodate as many Back-Bench Members as possible? This applies to both sides of the House: some extremely serious public purpose-focused questions are being put, but they are too long.
The Prime Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

On the ESA underpayments, obviously mistakes should not have happened and we need to clear this up as quickly as possible. The DWP is taking the issue very seriously. It has about 1,200 people working on sorting out the cases. We have already paid out almost £330 million. The Department expects to finish correcting the majority of the original cases by April and it aims to process additional cases by the end of the year.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Yesterday, pupils from Tweedmouth Community Middle School won the national Modeshift STARS trophy for secondary schools for its amazing work to encourage more pupils to cycle to school. Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating the school, its head, Mr Hulbert, and his team of staff, who are committed to creating a fitter, greener and more environmentally focused next generation of Berwickers?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in thanking and congratulating Tweedmouth Community Middle School on its excellent work encouraging pupils to cycle to school. It is clearly an excellent achievement. We all know the importance of keeping our young people active. I congratulate Mr Hulbert and all the teachers, but particularly the students who have taken this up and put it into practice. It is a very good example of what schools are doing across the country.

Q14. [909635] Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My constituent, Yvonne Chafey, has a four-year-old son, Logan, who is the only child in the whole of Europe with chromosome 7p duplication syndrome, which causes epilepsy and autism. Hardly any prescriptions of medicinal cannabis have been allowed to date, and with Logan being so unique, he will always be denied access under the current rules of proven benefit. What changes can be made to allow Logan to access cannabis products to ease his suffering without his family having to go through a very high-profile public campaign?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has raised a distressing case about a constituent. We have taken steps to ensure that medicinal cannabis is available, but decisions on availability are taken by clinicians, as is absolutely right.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I welcome the publication of the draft Domestic Abuse Bill, and I hope it will pass successfully through the House. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, as well as tackling extreme abuse and violence, we should also raise awareness of the entry level acts of coercion, deceit and manipulation that lead to more extreme examples?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised an important issue. People will obviously have seen distressing cases of coercion and indeed some instances where that has been taken through the courts. We all need to recognise the importance of dealing with domestic abuse and recognise that for too long the issue of coercion was not accepted or addressed. It is important. It is this Government who are doing that. As he says, we must be very clear about the entry level behaviours that lead to that distress.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Today is the 10th anniversary of the blacklist of construction workers being exposed, and today various news reports detail the extraordinary admissions in the Creadon report that the police and special branches across the UK and the security services supplied information to the Consulting Association. Does the Prime Minister agree that there now needs to be a full standalone UK public inquiry into the human rights conspiracy of blacklisting so that truth and justice can be served and those responsible for blacklisting can be held to account?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises an issue that has been raised on several occasions. Of course, the Government have responded on this and I would be happy to write to him on it.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): This Ash Wednesday, will the Prime Minister give strong encouragement and support to the 48 Conservative MPs who are taking on an environmental challenge because we have seen the devastating impact of plastics across the world? Will she give a big shout-out to all Members of the House taking on a plastics pledge and raising the good work of Tearfund and the Department for International Development in reducing plastic pollution?

The Prime Minister: I was pleased to see many hon. Friends giving up plastic last year, and I am pleased to hear that many colleagues are planning on supporting Tearfund’s plastics pledge. Through UK Aid Match, the UK Government will match donations of up to £2 million raised by Tearfund’s supporters for a project in Pakistan. We are committed to the UK being a world leader in tackling plastic pollution. Hon. Members are showing by their example the role that the UK is playing, and I congratulate and applaud them.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): The Prime Minister will recall the advice she received from her Conservative colleagues as well as mine about the dangerous folly of making landlords responsible in criminal law for immigration control. Following the High Court ruling of Mr Justice Spencer that her policy is now increasing the risk of racial discrimination, will she not accept that her policy is fanning the flames of racism in return for nothing but tougher rhetoric about immigration control?

The Prime Minister: It is absolutely right that the Government have taken the approach that we need to consider, when people are accessing different services, whether they have a right to be in this country. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has issued a written ministerial statement in response to the case in the courts and I understand that the Government are appealing the case.
Mr Speaker: I will come to the right hon. Gentleman, but I think there is a point of order from Mr Ian Blackford. I hope it is a genuine point of order.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is disappointing that the Prime Minister, who was alerted that I would be making a point of order, has chosen to scurry from the Chamber. Mr Speaker, you will agree that what we say in the Chamber is important. In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), the Prime Minister said that the Scottish National party did not have a mandate for independence. Let me say unequivocally that is not the case. The SNP stood on a manifesto commitment to holding an independence referendum if there was a material change of circumstances. It might be a surprise to the Prime Minister, but we won the election. Perhaps more importantly, we took a motion to the Scottish Parliament, because there is emphatically a majority for independence in that Parliament, and we won that vote in March 2017 by 69 votes to 59. I wonder what mechanism is open to me, Mr Speaker, to make sure the Prime Minister comes back and corrects the record and accedes to the fact that the SNP and the Scottish Government do have a majority and mandate for independence.

Mr Speaker: I say to the right hon. Gentleman and for the benefit of those interested in this matter, first, that he has made his point with vigour and insistence, very much in the mould he has fashioned since his election to the House. No one could be in any doubt about what he believes; it is one the record. Secondly—I do not know if this will be welcome to him, but it is the honest answer from the Chair—there has been no procedural impropriety or breach of order. There is nothing untoward, in parliamentary terms, about how the Prime Minister has conducted herself. I recognise that it is disagreeable to and strongly objected to by him and his colleagues here assembled, but that, I am afraid, is in the nature of political debate and disagreement. As to when he will have a chance further to pursue his disagreement with the Prime Minister, I think that opportunity will arise ere long.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I hope the hon. Gentleman has a genuine point of order. He is certainly wearing a fabulous tie. Whether his point of order is of equal quality remains to be seen, but I will give him a chance.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I accept the compliment about my tie, which is reciprocated.

The truth is that what the Prime Minister said is not the situation in Scotland. There is a mandate for independence. She said there was not a mandate, but there is. That is a fact.

Mr Speaker: I am not sure that greatly added to the intellectual quality of the exchange, but nevertheless the hon. Gentleman has made his point with some force, and it is on the record, but I do not think it requires a response from the Chair at this time. I am sorry if I have misunderstood, but I feel he has put his point, and it rests and will be assessed and evaluated by all colleagues.

Hilary Benn: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Next Tuesday, the House will vote again on the withdrawal agreement. The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union was due to appear before the Committee yesterday but cancelled for perfectly understandable reasons—he was in Brussels with the Attorney General negotiating. We of course accept that, but we have offered him other times this week and next Monday afternoon, none of which have been accepted so far.

While we understand that negotiations will continue, I was very surprised to learn this morning, at a meeting of the Committee, that the Secretary of State’s office had offered times to individual members of the Committee for him to meet them later on Monday afternoon, but had not so far confirmed that he would be available to appear before the Committee. Given that next Tuesday we may well be considering further legal assurances related to the withdrawal agreement, the Committee is absolutely clear that we must hear from him before we vote on Tuesday.

I would not normally raise a point of order on such a matter, Mr Speaker, but given its urgency and the profoundly unsatisfactory state of affairs, what advice can you give the Committee so that we can secure the Secretary of State’s attendance—which is his job—before we vote next Tuesday?

Mr Speaker: My advice is simple: persist, persist, persist.

Let me say to the right hon. Gentleman, who is held in the highest esteem in, I think, all parts of the House, that if he, on behalf—and clearly with the agreement—of the Committee, seeks the presence of the Secretary of State prior to an important debate and attendant vote, the Secretary of State should appear before the Committee. That cannot be compelled, certainly not by the Chair, but it is manifest and, I think, incontrovertible that it is desirable in terms of the scrutiny and accountability process; from which something else follows.

Simply offering individual meetings with members of the Committee does not remotely pass muster. The fact is that the Select Committee is an established body in the House, established to scrutinise the Government’s Brexit policy, and it has a corporate character. Indeed, its members are operating not merely as individual Members of Parliament, but as part of a body politic—in this case, as part of that Committee. So my advice to the right hon. Gentleman is that he should persist, making it absolutely clear that it is the view of the Committee that the presence of the Secretary of State is desired. It is frankly, if I may say so, a point so blindingly obvious—[Interruption.] Be quiet, young man. In ethical terms, it is so manifestly fair, that that is what should happen.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This Friday I will attend the funeral of Charles Smith MBE. When he died at the age of 98 he had been a member of the Labour party for 84 years, which I believe made him the most long-standing member
of the party. In paying tribute to him, may I ask for your guidance, Mr Speaker, on how I might use this opportunity to encourage everyone in Parliament to celebrate all those people who have given long service to our political parties, to recognise that the vast majority of them do so in order to support their communities and the country, and to recognise that our political parties are broadly a force for good and we should welcome their membership?

Mr Speaker: I do not dissent from that. The hon. Gentleman has made his point very well. It does not require anything further to be said by the Chair, but I congratulate him on taking his opportunity.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You have been extremely helpful in ensuring that Parliament can hold the Executive to account in respect of knife crime. Given the Prime Minister’s announcement today of a knife crime summit and given what the Home Secretary has done today in meeting various political leaders, is there anything further we can do to ensure that, at the earliest possible opportunity, either the Home Secretary or the Prime Minister comes to the House to give us an update on this extremely important issue?

Mr Speaker: In terms of parliamentary opportunity on the Floor of the House, there is a chance tomorrow, and, indeed, there is a chance on Monday. The opportunities are there, and it is up to Members whether they seek to seize those opportunities. I hope that that is helpful to colleagues.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will you please advise me on how I can best clarify the record in respect of a comment that I made during business questions on 20 December 2018?

On that occasion I highlighted the work of two campaigns in the city of Glasgow. One, Saving Lives, led by Duncan and Margaret Spiers, was started in the wake of the tragic death of their 28-year-old son, Christopher Spiers, in an accident at the River Clyde in 2016. Their campaign seeks to promote water safety, to ensure that vital life-saving equipment is provided on the banks of the River Clyde and across Scotland, and, most importantly, to ensure that throw ropes are attached to lifebelts. I also mentioned the Think Again campaign for emergency lifeline telephones to be installed on the Clyde to help those who are in urgent need of emotional support.

For the avoidance of any doubt that may have arisen at the time of my original remarks, Mr Speaker, I wish to emphasise that the two campaigns are separate, with distinctive objectives, and that both are doing excellent work in their respective ways to preserve life in the city of Glasgow and further afield.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He asks me how he can best clarify the record in respect of what he said in the House in December. My response to him is that he has proved to be the architect of his own salvation. Through the device of his point of order, he has succeeded in clarifying the matter and putting the facts very clearly on the record. In the process he has highlighted again the excellent work of those two campaigns, and I thank him for doing so.

Social Security and Employment Support for Disabled People

1.5 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if she will make a statement on the changes that her Department intends to make to social security and employment support, including the assessment process, for disabled people and people with health conditions.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): Yesterday the Secretary of State provided the House with a written statement, and delivered a speech to Scope that included, among other announcements, an announcement about changes in the delivery of health and disability benefits.

We are making significant progress in improving people’s experiences of claiming disability benefits by working through the recommendations made by several independent reviews of personal independence payments and the employment support allowance, but we need to continue to make improvements in order to give better support to people with health conditions and disabilities. The written statement set out a number of additional measures that we will implement to make improvements, now and in the future, in support for disabled people and those with health conditions.

We will improve and simplify people’s experiences by no longer undertaking regular reviews of PIP awards for claimants at or above the state pension age unless they tell us that their needs have changed. We will also transform the delivery of assessment services. We have established a health transformation programme to undertake the significant task of combining the currently separate work capability assessment for ESA and universal credit and PIP assessment services in one unified, integrated service from 2021. We are extending the contract for the health and disability assessment service, which includes the delivery of the work capability assessment, and aligning it with the duration of the extended PIP contracts. That will allow for a safe and stable service now, and as we make the transition to the new integrated service.

The Department for Work and Pensions will also be testing how we can increase engagement and build a trusted and strong relationship between work coaches and people who are awaiting assessments for universal credit or who are found to have limited capability for work. The Minister for Employment will take that forward.

The health transformation programme will be co-designed with disabled people. The Secretary of State and I will engage regularly with disabled people, disabled people’s organisations and charities. All of us, whatever our age or need, want an equal chance to live a life of opportunity and fulfilment. We intend to support disabled people during all the phases of their lives, so that the pursuit of equality is a shared goal.

Debbie Abrahams: Thank you for granting the urgent question. Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister for her response. I am, however, disappointed that the Secretary of State was not here to respond, and that the Minister...
has had to respond to an urgent question rather than
making an oral statement, given the extensive scope of
the proposals.

I welcome yesterday’s announcement that there would
be no PIP reassessment for disabled people above the
state pension age, but why are not all disabled people—
particularly those with progressive conditions such as
motor neurone disease, multiple sclerosis and cancer—being
exempted from repeat assessments? I have a constituent
with terminal secondary breast cancer which has gone
into her bones, and she has been refused PIP.

The launch of a transformation programme whereby
PIP and WCA assessments will be integrated by 2021 is
interesting, given that the Government have previously
said that that could not be done. How exactly will the
two assessments be merged? Who is involved? I am
grateful that the Minister has said they will be co-designed
with disabled people, but will she commit to supporting
the principle of “nothing about you without you”? Will
there be a pilot? If so, where and when, and what would
be the sample size? Will there be an independent evaluation?

Who will provide the new service? There are real
concerns about the profiteering enabled by this Government
at the expense of disabled people. There are also worrying
reports in various GP journals this week that the medical
records of claimants will be made available to the DWP
or their social security support will be denied. So I will
be grateful if the Minister can confirm that this is not,
and will not be, Government policy. Obviously there are
huge issues around privacy and ethics.

There is also strong evidence of the physical and
emotional harm that these assessments are having on
disabled people, over and above their condition. What is
being put in place before 2021 to improve the poor
quality, validity and reliability of these assessments?

On UC and the role of job coaches in determining
limited capability to work, the detail was most unclear
in the written ministerial statement. Can the Minister
expand on it and confirm that work coaches may start
an assessment to determine a claimant’s capacity to
work? Can she also confirm a shift in the Government’s
approach to sanctions and expand on her Department’s
approach to conditionality?

I welcome the review into the inadequacy of social
security support for disabled people and more widely.
Poverty is a political choice, and 4.2 million disabled
people have been pushed into poverty as a result of the
£5 billion in cuts since 2010. So what form will this
review take and, again, who will be involved?

On the Government’s more ambitious targets to get
disabled people into work, again the pendulum is swinging
back. The Conservative general election pledge in 2015
was to halve the disability employment gap, but it is
actually 4.4% lower than 2015. Then in 2017 there was a
pledge about 1 million additional disabled people getting
into work, but there was nothing about access to work.

Finally, what is the Minister going to do about the
cultural changes needed in her Department to ensure
that disabled people and other claimants do not feel
demonised, even dehumanised, as happens all too often?

Sarah Newton: I fear I will test your patience, of
Mr Speaker, if I try to answer all of those questions at
once, but I will do my best.

I welcome the hon. Lady’s tone and her welcome for
the measures we announced in the written ministerial
statement. Clearly we have been listening very hard to
Members across this Chamber and, most importantly,
to disabled people themselves about the changes they
would like to see, and that is what has driven the
changes we are going to be making. I absolutely want to
confirm that throughout the process—in fact this is
how we work now—we engage fully with disabled people,
ensuring them to help us develop the services which are
for them.

The hon. Lady touched on a few points about people
being repeatedly reassessed. I remind her that we brought
in the severe conditions criteria so that people who have
reached the highest level of support on PIP will not be
routinely reassessed; we have introduced a 10-year light
touch review so that many people with the sorts of
conditions and illnesses the hon. Lady described will
not be undergoing further reassessments. We also have
a special process for people who are terminally ill. I
undertook research in the summer—and I have been
delighted to work with the hon. Member for Bridgend
(Mrs Moon) on the work she has been doing—looking
again at how the special rules for people at the end of
life are working. We have worked very closely with the
medical profession, which I think was not often aware
of the special processes that could so easily be put in
place to enables people to get benefits within days. I will
shortly be announcing new guidance which is the fruition
of the work we have been doing over the last few
months.

I want to remind everyone that in the transition from
DLA to PIP many more people with mental health
conditions are now receiving support, particularly at
the highest levels. Concerns have also been raised about
work coaches and their ability to work with people with
disabilities and health conditions, and I want to reassure
the House that all of our work coaches are receiving
extensive training and will continue to do so. Over
10,000 work coaches have already received training in
mental health services, so I believe that that personal
relationship that we want all people claiming benefits
to have with their work coach is a possibility and is happening
the length and breadth of the country.

We are looking at conditionality and have taken up
the recommendations given to us. When people with
severe disabilities and health conditions apply for UC
there is no conditionality; that conditionality will be
switched off, and then as the relationship develops with
the work coach, if and when they are prepared to take
those steps to work, they will be fully supported by their
work coach and other resources that they have available.

As would be expected, we listened to and worked
with a range of stakeholders before the announcement
to develop the new service. I can absolutely commit to
the House that the co-design will be ongoing and there
will be plenty of opportunities for everyone in the
House to be involved in how we take that forward. But
the simple ideal behind it is to reduce the number of
assessments people have to take and reduce the amount
of information they have to give to the Department. We
have all heard in our surgeries each week particularly in
terms of people in receipt of both ESA and PIP that
they can be asked to complete a whole number of forms
where they give us the same information, and are going
to assessments where they give the same information.
The whole aim of this is to reduce that and to simplify it, so that people give us the information once and we are able to make the best decision we can right from the outset.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): It never made sense to me for us to pay different contractors who compete with each other to recruit competent staff to carry out assessments which make many disabled people feel they are involved in a duplicatory process, which adds to the stress. So may I strongly welcome today the decision to combine the ESA and PIP assessments? That will make the system more efficient and hopefully provide more dignity for disabled people.

Sarah Newton: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. This builds on some of the work he started when he was in the Department. It is very much based on listening to people and their experience of the current benefit system. I could not agree more that we need to have a much more streamlined, simplified process under which people tell us the information once, we gather it once, and we are able to make the best possible accurate decisions the first time.

Marsha de Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) on securing this urgent question. As we saw yesterday, the Secretary of State announced changes to social security, disability and health. By my calculations, she made no fewer than nine different announcements in her statement. The Government will now hand over more money to the Centre for Health and Disability Assessments, better known as Maximus, to continue to carry out the work capability assessments. This is despite the failure, year on year, to meet the Department’s own performance standards and no fewer than 36,000 ill and disabled people wrongly deprived of social security as a result of W CAs. Can the Minister therefore say why the Government have decided to extend the contract for another 16 months? Will the Minister finally consider bringing these assessments back in-house?

The Government have announced that they are looking to merge the assessments for PIP and ESA into an integrated assessment service and use a digital platform to do so. Does the Minister not agree that there is serious risk involved in combining both assessments when the standard of decision making for PIP and ESA is the subject of so many failures? Given the consistent failures with the online platform for universal credit, what confidence should ill and disabled people have that this will not happen to them when they go through a process to access vital social security support?

Over 1 million sanctions have been imposed on disabled people since 2010, and those sanctions have been shown to be counterproductive and cruel. But so far the Government have committed to only a small “test” review of conditionality and sanctions. Why will the Government not follow Labour in pledging to scrap the punitive sanctions regime?

The Government have once again moved the goalposts on employing disabled people. First they wanted to halve the disability employment gap and now they are going to review it yet again. It is time for the Government to consider expanding Access to Work, rather than simply reviewing their employment targets. There are currently seven reviews being conducted into disabled people being wrongly deprived of social security support. These changes are just a drop in the ocean, so will the Minister finally accept that there needs to be fundamental reform, not just tinkering around the edges?

Sarah Newton: I really would have hoped that, today of all days, the hon. Lady could have found it in her heart to welcome the changes that have been asked for by so many people inside and outside this Chamber, and to recognise the great work that has been done by disabled people, and those who work with them, to engage with us so constructively and enable us to move forward and tackle the issues that she is describing.

The hon. Lady is right to say that we said yesterday that we were going to be more ambitious in enabling more disabled people into work, because we have made such good progress. Since 2013, over 930,000 more disabled people are now in work. Over that time, the disability employment rate has increased from 7.4% to 51.5%, and the gap between the disabled employment rate and the overall employment rate has been reduced to 30.2%. I do not want to see any disabled person out of work when they would like to be in work, but we have made progress and that is why we have committed to reviewing our targets and to being more ambitious. Access to Work is a great scheme, as we all agree, and it supported record numbers of people last year, including more people with mental health conditions and more young people with learning disabilities. The Access to Work fund is demand-led, and it grows every year because every year we are seeing more disabled people into work, and that is what we want to do.

Returning to the hon. Lady’s questions about the contracts, it is really important to me that, while we are going through such a fundamental transformation of our assessment process, we have safe and stable delivery for people who are applying for benefits. That is why we have extended the contracts to 2021, to align with the PIP contracts. We have not just accepted the existing situation, as the hon. Lady knows, and I am grateful for the work undertaken by the Select Committee on this. We have been pushing for continuous improvement within those contracts. The new contracts have higher standards for service delivery, and I would be happy to put a letter in the Library so that people can see the terms of the new contracts and see that they are driving forward improvement. We all want to see the right decisions being made at the first opportunity. We do not want to see people having to go through mandatory reconsideration and then on to appeals in the courts, and we have a whole series of reforms to ensure that that does not happen.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I welcome what was in the written statement yesterday and what the Minister has reiterated about the more ambitious target to get more disabled people into work. As an aside, I also welcome what the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) said earlier. As a former Minister for disabled people, I am particularly attracted to the more ambitious target that we had in our 2015 manifesto. Indeed, I may have had a hand in writing it myself. On the substantive question, if we are going to get more disabled people into work, we need to...
ensure that the social care system—over half of whose budget is spent on working-age adults, not on older people—works better with our social security system and with the other means that we have of helping disabled people to become more independent. I urge the Minister to publish the social care Green Paper as soon as possible, and to start that much-needed debate so that we can deliver those policy changes that many disabled people across the country are crying out for and give them the opportunity to live more independent and fulfilling lives.

Sarah Newton: I very much thank my right hon. Friend for his contribution in the Chamber today and for all the work that he did when he had the privilege of holding this office. He is absolutely right to say that we want to be more ambitious. We will be looking carefully at how we can set ourselves really ambitious goals to ensure that everybody in our country has the opportunity to fulfil their potential in work, and that business, civil society and the public sector can draw on the talents of the very many disabled people who are unemployed at the moment. He is also right to talk about the importance of adult social care. It is of course the Department of Health and Social Care that leads on this, but I work closely with it and I have been encouraging it to go ahead and publish that very important Green Paper so that we can take forward those urgent reforms and enable more people to live independent lives.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I cannot help but feel that this announcement was a missed opportunity to completely overhaul the punitive PIP assessment progress, which is deeply flawed and continues to be criticised by claimants and stakeholders. The latest PIP assessment tribunal statistics show that from June to September 2018, a staggering 72% of cases found in favour of the claimant. The Minister will be aware that Scotland is taking a wholly different approach, proposing to significantly reduce the need for face-to-face assessments, introducing rolling awards with no set end points, and ensuring that those with fluctuating conditions will not face additional reviews. That is what a system based on dignity and respect looks like. What are this Government doing to address the fact that claimants are still being wrongly assessed at such a staggering rate? Will she look at what the Scottish Government are doing to reduce the burden that is being placed on disabled claimants? Will she also agree to study carefully the responses to the consultation announced yesterday by the Scottish Government on delivering a fairer disability assistance benefit programme in Scotland?

Sarah Newton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions. I should like to reassure him that I do indeed work with my opposite number in the Scottish Government, and that we are working closely together as we go through the process of devolving PIP and other benefits to Scotland. Actually, we are testing and learning a great deal from each other. The UK Government are investing a great deal in health and work trials, and we work collaboratively on those. We are always prepared to learn from any part of the United Kingdom. I absolutely agree that too many people are having their decisions overturned on appeal—we want to ensure that we get all the decisions right first time—but it is worth keeping this in perspective, because 10% of all PIP claims go to appeal and only 5% are overturned. However, as I always say from the Dispatch Box, one person’s poor experience is one too many. We have been doing a lot of work with the Courts and Tribunals Service to bring down waiting times, and I hope that all Members will join me in welcoming the fact that we now have a new PIP online appeal service. Since November, people can resolve their appeals online, which is enabling far swifter resolution of those issues.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I produced a list of things that had gone wrong in the claims procedures of my constituents, and I provided it to the Secretary of State’s predecessor to help her to shape these reforms. Will the Minister undertake to dig that paper out and have a look at it, and to ensure that those reforms can be implemented?

Sarah Newton: I think I can go one better than that, because I would like to invite my hon. Friend in to meet me and go through his paper with me, given all the hard work that he has put in, to ensure that we get this right.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): We all support any improvement in the lot of disabled people, but my constituency has one of the highest percentages of disabled people, because of past industrial diseases and so on, and I remember the grief that was caused to so many people when they were forced to reclaim or to appear before various groups of people to be reassessed. There are too many people who are still in that category, and I hope the Minister will be able to assist with improving that situation. I also want to ask her about the situation regarding Remploy. We had a big fight in this Chamber over Remploy, as she may remember, and we were told that alternative jobs would be available, but can she give us the actual figures? I know that too many people in my constituency who were employed in Remploy are still out of work.

Sarah Newton: The right hon. Lady raises an important point about reassessments. Through a series of measures that we have taken this year, and through the ones that we have announced, far fewer people will be reassessed. We want to ensure that people are getting the support they need. Under the old legacy system, people were just parked on benefits for a very long time, and they were missing out. The evidence of that is the amount of people who get more money on PIP than they did on DLA. It is important that people are assessed to ensure that they are getting all the support to which they are entitled. Remploy in Wales is doing a great job as part of our health and work programme, and we have also introduced new supported ways of employing people, such as the intensive personalised employment support—IPES—programme. I would be very happy to write to the right hon. Lady to describe what is happening in Wales, and if she does feel that people who should be in employment are not in employment, she should please come and meet me so that we can look at those cases.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I warmly welcome the changes that my hon. Friend outlined. Last week, the Scottish Government announced their timetable for replacing personal independence payments, disability living allowance, attendance allowance and carer’s
allowance, which will now not be completed until 2024, three years after they initially promised. Will she reassure me, my constituents and all in the House that the Department for Work and Pensions and the UK Government did all that they possibly could to ensure that the Scottish Government were set up for this and that actually there is resistance from the Scottish Government to taking the powers?

Sarah Newton: I thank my hon. Friend for that very important question. She is absolutely right about the absolute commitment of my colleagues in the DWP to ensure that the Scottish Government can take on those powers. We have not created any delays whatsoever; the delays are all in Holyrood.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): A few moments ago, in Prime Minister’s questions, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) raised the case of a constituent who turned up for a disability assessment, was faced with a long wait and eventually had to rebook the appointment. The Prime Minister suggested that she or perhaps the Minister before us would look into the case, but it is not an isolated matter. I, too, have constituents with exactly the same experience, including a gentleman who last month at an appointment with the Centre for Health and Disability Assessments was forced to wait for an hour and 40 minutes, despite having told the CHDA that the nature of his condition meant that he would need to be seen very quickly.

I very much welcome the Minister’s offer to place in the Library information about the contract that has been issued to the assessment companies. We need to be able to scrutinise the performance standards and the rate at which the companies are achieving or failing to meet them. Will she repeat that commitment to the House, so that we can be absolutely clear that the information will be available to us?

Sarah Newton: I was not in Prime Minister’s questions to hear that particular example, but of course I will follow it up with great urgency. It is not acceptable for people to have appointments cancelled at the last minute or to be asked to wait. That is certainly not the service that we expect from our contractors.

I have made the commitment to publish the standards that we are insisting on in the contract. We monitor compliance with the standards very carefully, and there are penalties in the contract if people fall short of the high standards that we expect of them. Every person with a health condition or disability must be treated with respect and dignity.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend and her colleagues for listening so much and for making these changes, but will she look at the face-to-face assessments and at whether more could be done with paper-based reviews or home visits? It is pretty difficult for some people to get to the assessment centres, certainly from my constituency, and some people who have mental health conditions find the assessments incredibly stressful.

Sarah Newton: I thank my hon. Friend for his long-standing and passionate championship of the vulnerable people in his constituency and across our country.

We have listened very carefully to what he has said and we have increased the number of home visits that can be undertaken but I definitely want to go further and, wherever possible, make decisions based on the information provided by the medical profession, the disabled people themselves or those people supporting them so as to reduce the number of face-to-face assessments. They are all undertaken by qualified healthcare professionals, whose training we keep under review. I want to ensure that we have only those face-to-face assessments that are really necessary.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) on securing the urgent question. I share the welcome for the exemption of those over state retirement age from routine reassessments. Will the Government look again at exempting all those with learning disabilities and progressive conditions, including all those who only secured their benefit—ESA or PIP—through the tribunals process? The Minister is right that some disability organisations will welcome fewer assessments, but the fear or anxiety for disabled people is that the high error rate in existing processes will be transferred. Will the Minister give more detail about how that process will be improved and how individual disabled people and disability organisations can help to shape any new process, and when that will begin?

Sarah Newton: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that that work is all under way. There have been several independent reviews of PIP and ESA, including one by the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, which made the recommendations that we are working through now, to ensure that the assessments are as accurate as they can be. We are not waiting. The huge benefit of the transformed service is that the DWP will own the whole claimant journey—we are building a whole digital platform—and we will be able to use the medical and other information far more easily to make the right decision the first time. As I said at the beginning, the whole new process will be co-designed with disabled people.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the announcements to bring in a better service for those seeking to make claims, in particular on the combination of assessments. An issue that is regularly picked up is a more independent record of some of the assessments. What further consideration have the Government given to things such as video recording of assessments, which might not only give confidence to the person taking part, but allow for quality-control reviews and an easier process in tribunal?

Sarah Newton: I thank my hon. Friend for raising video recording, because our hope is that that will bring a lot of transparency, trust and confidence to the assessments. We are reviewing the findings of a successful pilot. We remain committed to rolling out video recording.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): The Minister should know that there really are serious problems with PIP and work capability assessments. I have lost count of the number of constituents who have come to see me in a desperate state because of the lack of understanding
and awareness, in particular for those with fluctuating physical and mental health problems. The fact that 83% of people with multiple sclerosis who appeal their PIP case are successful shows how flawed the system is. On that specific point, how will the assessment process and the training and skills of those delivering it change to address such serious problems?

Sarah Newton: Inevitably, we want to ensure that we make the process better. Each time I come to the Chamber, I describe the steps that we are taking. Specifically on the case of people with multiple sclerosis, or cases brought to me by people who feel that their conditions are not properly understood by healthcare professionals, I ensure that the healthcare professionals meet those people, that they look at the guidance together, and update it and the training used by the frontline people doing the assessments. We get positive feedback from that.

Every year, we look at independent research into the experience of people at the face-to-face assessments. It is really important to me that they feel that they are being listened to, and 89% of people said that the assessor had treated them with respect and dignity. In the high 80s, people are saying that they had time and felt listened to, and 89% of people said that the experience of people at the face-to-face assessments. It is still not 100%, which we are working towards, but it is important, because we do not want people outside listening to this debate feeling petrified about going to have an assessment. We know that the vast majority of people have a positive experience when they go along, but we are working continuously to ensure that we improve the process for everyone.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): This is welcome news for many pensioners, who do not now have to undergo repeat appointments, but it does not address the fundamental flaw in the system to which the Minister herself has alluded: 72% of PIP and ESA appeals still find in favour of the claimant. Atos, Maximus and Capita are not doing the job properly. Rather than seeking to improve that, will she not consider bringing the assessment in-house so that it can be done properly?

Sarah Newton: I point out gently to the hon. Lady that 8% of people who apply for ESA go to appeal, and 4% are overturned. I do not want that to be 2%, 1% or 0.1%; I want us to get the decision right the first time, but we must use the information accurately. It is important that we are evidence-based policy makers. When it comes to who will carry out the assessments from 2021, the healthcare professionals doing so have always been clear that by creating this transformed service and our own digital platform, many more people will be able to come forward to say that they can undertake the services, and I would be particularly happy if NHS trusts said that they would do so.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I welcome the fact that Ministers are seeking to improve the accuracy of PIP and ESA assessments and to reduce the number of appeals, but it still takes 48 weeks for an appeal to be heard in my constituency. May I ask the Minister to look urgently at how people are treated while they are awaiting an appeal? My constituent had a serious heart condition, and his doctor said he was not fit to go back to work. The DWP said that that was its decision, not the doctor’s decision. My constituent died on his first full day back at work, which he was forced into. He was awaiting his appeal. It is too late for him, but his wife has asked me to take it up with Ministers to seek a better solution for people who are awaiting appeals, many of whom are rightly and justly appealing.

Sarah Newton: I pass on my sincere condolences to the hon. Lady’s constituent. Of course I will sit down with her to review the case in great detail, because it is a very, very sad thing to hear what happened to her constituent. Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service has employed hundreds more people so that cases can be heard sooner. I am particularly pleased that we have introduced an online resolution service so that, once people’s information is uploaded on to the system, DWP decision makers can look at that information. If we can make a decision earlier that could prevent people from having to go to a tribunal, we will do so. I am very hopeful that we will start to see waiting times reduce significantly.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): My constituents in Glasgow North East have seen £2 million taken out of their pockets as a result of the transition from disability living allowance to personal independence payment, but that is not the full story. People are often claiming these disability-related benefits as part of a wider series of social security payments, which have been subject to a freeze since 2016. Child benefit, for example, has been subject to a 23% real-terms decline since 2010, so obviously those in receipt will be disproportionately harmed. What will the Minister be doing? Will she write to the Chancellor of the Exchequer about ending the benefits freeze and ensuring that benefits are at least tied to inflation so that people can maintain a level of dignity in our social security system?

Sarah Newton: It is not true at all that benefits for disabled people have been frozen. This House recently uprated those benefits by 2.4%, and this year we will spend £4 billion more than we spent 10 years ago. All the benefits supporting people with disabilities will continue to grow to 2020. They will be growing throughout this Parliament.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): At a recent surgery I held for carers, a woman came along with a case relating to her daughter who has disabilities, and we managed to get a back payment of £22,000 in disability payments. If I had not held that surgery for carers, and if the excellent local carers organisation had not put that lady in touch, her daughter would still be waiting for those payments. We cannot have a situation in which people rely on such fortuitous circumstances to get justice. What can the Minister do about that?

Sarah Newton: The hon. Lady makes an important point. We know that too many people have been missing out on billions of pounds’ worth of benefits. That is why I hope she will welcome the fact that universal credit and the personal relationship that people have with their work coaches will enable them to understand the full range of benefits available to them. Citizens Advice, working in partnership with jobcentres, will be able to signpost more people to get more support, and I
hope Opposition Members will spend some time in their jobcentres to understand the range of services and signposting that is now available from work coaches.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): These are very small changes in the right direction, but they recognise that the system does not work. To enable us to better understand the impact of Government policy on ill and disabled people, will the Minister commit to publishing constituency data on the number of UC50 forms that are issued to claimants and the number that are returned? Without proper detailed information, we will not be able to understand the impact on our constituents.

Sarah Newton: I will take that suggestion away and see whether we can collect that data and whether it is possible to provide it on a constituency basis. I challenge people who say that the whole system has failed because, from the information we have, we can see that millions of people are benefiting from these benefits and that more money is being spent every year. It is important that people have the confidence to come forward and access the benefits to which they are entitled. We remain committed to reforming the work capability assessment, which was brought in by the Labour Government in 2008, and we have taken a lot of time to consult a lot of people. Although everyone can agree that it needs to change, there is no consensus on how it can change. We are continuing that work, because I am determined to see these improvements made.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I think we can all agree that social security staff are under a lot of pressure in dealing with the claimants we have heard about today. Does the Minister agree that those who administer social security should be supported in employment with adequate pay from this Government? Civil servants are receiving 0.25% to 1%—those who took the bribe—but such an increase, in real terms, is a cut.

Sarah Newton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, because it gives me a wonderful opportunity to pay tribute to the fantastic, hard-working, dedicated and compassionate DWP staff, both in our operating centres and in our jobcentres. I understand from our lead officials in the Department that they have a very good working relationship with the trade unions and that they are listening very carefully. We are working very hard to make sure that people are fairly rewarded.

Leaving the EU: Protection for Workers

1.46 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): I would like to make a statement about workers’ rights when we leave the European Union. Before I do, as this is my first time at the Dispatch Box since his death on Friday, I put on record my deep appreciation for the life and work of Lord Bhattacharyya, a heroic figure in British manufacturing. His work attracted investment to which hundreds of thousands of working men and women owe their livelihoods. A Labour Member of the House of Lords, Kumar worked easily with Ministers and, indeed, Prime Ministers from all parties for the benefit of the people of the west midlands and the whole nation.

The United Kingdom and this Parliament have a proud record of improving the rights of working men and women: from Shaftesbury’s Factories Acts to William Hague’s Disability Discrimination Act 1995; and from the minimum wage, introduced by a Labour Government, to the national living wage brought in by a Conservative Government. Although the EU sets minimum requirements in many areas of workers’ rights and health and safety, Britain has time and again been in advance of those requirements and has chosen to exceed them.

The EU agency for the improvement of working conditions ranks the UK as the second strongest of all 28 member states, behind only Sweden, for wellbeing in the workplace. The UK offers 39 weeks of statutory maternity pay, compared with the 14 weeks required by the EU. We have given fathers and partners a statutory right to paternity leave, which the EU is only just beginning to consider.

Our national living wage is one of the highest in the EU, and the Low Pay Commission that advises on it is widely respected. Because we have not, in practice, been limited to EU standards, there is no reason why we should not maintain this record of leadership outside the EU. The Prime Minister has given a commitment that Brexit will not be allowed to erode workers’ rights.

Nevertheless, some hon. Members have advanced the view in previous debates that a parliamentary mechanism should be established to monitor and implement that commitment. The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) introduced a private Member’s Bill to that effect, and the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) and the hon. Members for Bassetlaw (John Mann) and for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), among others, proposed an amendment to a previous motion in a similar vein.

We have been discussing closely with Members on both sides of the House, trade unions and businesses how we can turn this intention into law. The Government are today publishing draft clauses for inclusion in the withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill to put these commitments into law. The clauses have two main features. First, a new statutory duty will be placed on Ministers introducing a Bill that affects employment or workplace health and safety that they should certify, before Second Reading of any such Bill, that it is compatible with the Prime Minister’s principle of non-regression. They will be required to provide explanatory information to Parliament in support of that statement, which will be drawn up following consultation with
businesses and trade unions. That will ensure that, while respecting and upholding the sovereignty of this Parliament, Members of this House in future will be able clearly to consider the compatibility of every proposed measure with the non-regression principle, to which the Prime Minister has made a commitment.

The second aspect of the draft clauses concerns future EU legislation. Parliament will be given the opportunity, at least every six months, to consider any changes to EU workers’ rights, and health and safety standards in the workplace. This will be reported to Parliament through a document that has, again, been subject to consultation with employers and trade unions, and which will be scrutinised by the relevant Select Committees of this House, subject to their agreement. The Government will be required to table an amendable motion on their intended course of action on those new EU rules. For example, the Government may set out that they intend to legislate to give effect to those commitments or that they intend to give effect to them in a different way, or that they do not intend to give effect to them, setting out their rationale. There are a number of legislative proposals currently under consideration in the EU that have a deadline for transposition into national law which will be after the implementation period. We would expect them to be put forward for Parliament’s consideration under this new process. These draft clauses, published in a Command Paper today, combine well our determination to honour the commitment the Prime Minister has made not to see workers’ rights weakened and respecting the sovereignty of this Parliament.

A similar framework will apply to environmental protections as the UK leaves the EU, implemented through the environment Bill. On 19 December, we published the draft Environment (Principles and Governance) Bill, the first part of a much larger environment Bill to follow in the next Session. The draft Bill outlines our proposals to establish a world-leading body to hold the Government to account for environmental outcomes after the UK leaves the EU. The draft Bill also requires the Government to publish a statutory policy statement on the interpretation and application of nine environmental principles, including the four contained in EU treaties. The Government will also legislate to ensure that where future Bills could affect environmental protections, a Minister of the Crown will make a statement of compatibility to Parliament and provide explanatory information. We will also create a new statutory duty on the Government to monitor any strengthening of environmental protections and regulations by the EU, and to report regularly to Parliament about the Government’s intended course of action in those areas. That will give Parliament the information it needs to consider whether or not domestic protections need to be strengthened accordingly. Through these commitments, the Government will provide a robust framework for maintaining and strengthening environmental standards as the UK leaves the EU.

In addition to the measures I have described, I am announcing today steps that will strengthen the enforcement of workers’ rights. The vast majority of employers operate fairly and treat their employees well, but I have been concerned, as I know many Members have been, about the practices in a small number of firms, in a small number of industries, where abuses of the conditions at work are used to the detriment not just of workers, but of reputable competitors, who suffer a disadvantage by comparison in those industries. Therefore I intend to consult broadly on establishing a new body to bring together the relevant enforcement functions of the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, and the Employment Agency Standards Inspectorate. As part of the forthcoming spending review, we will consider what level of funding is appropriate to ensure that it is adequately resourced to deliver a strengthened remit.

The measures that I have announced today reflect a process of engagement across this House, and with employers and trade unions. Not everyone will agree with every proposal, but if, as I hope, an agreement can be reached on the withdrawal process during the days ahead, it serves as a helpful guide as to how we might find and act on common ground across the House in the next phase of negotiations. I commend this statement to the House.

1.53 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): Let me, too, put on record my sadness at the death of Lord Bhattacharyya and my deep appreciation for his devotion to British industry and politics.

I must start by thanking the Secretary of State for his engagement with me over recent weeks, and indeed with trade unions and my parliamentary colleagues whom he mentioned: my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint); and my hon. Friends the Members for Bassetlaw (John Mann) and for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell). They have championed unrelentingly the protection of British workers as we leave the EU and continue to help us move the position across the House to one that we are all content with.

However, as the Secretary of State knows from our discussions in recent days, sadly the proposals, as drafted, do not yet provide a full guarantee or assurance for UK workers. I hope that this spirit of collegiality will continue and that we will work together quickly to address my concerns and provide the changes and assurances that I seek. As he knows, the TUC has stated today:

“In the face of a government determined to reduce rights, these measures would in no meaningful way compensate for the loss of the protections that currently exist”.

The assessment of less favourability will be decided by parliamentary majority and not by the objective standards of the UK courts. The provisions can easily be revoked by a hostile Government, and even without being revoked, they can be rendered fairly meaningless in practice. Indeed, as drafted, the content of the proposed statement of compatibility and irregular parliamentary assessment of less favourability are not capable of legal challenge by any UK worker. Of course, the process outlined in the draft clauses could be subject to a judicial review, but simply issuing a statement and laying a motion are hardly rocket science. What will not be possible, however, is a challenge to the contents of a statement of compatibility or an approved parliamentary motion to accept a Government assessment.
I think the Secretary of State implied in his statement that we should not automatically accept favourable rights solely because the UK Parliament has already set higher standards of employment rights. On that point, let me be clear: no one—certainly none of the colleagues I have spoken to—is seeking anything other than that UK workers should be entitled to no less favourable rights at work than their EU comparators, not that we should accept unfavourable ones. That point is simple to draft and it could be made perfectly clear, and I am happy to work with the Secretary of State on that point.

Of course, Parliament is always welcome to give more, but history is littered with examples of the UK bitterly resisting EU directives on workplace rights. A Conservative Government sued the EU Commission over the working time directive, claiming that there was no legislative base for the directive since working time had nothing to do with health and safety at work. Luckily for workers in the UK and the rest of the EU, that Government lost.

On the promise not to water down existing rights and protections, even if a Bill is found to be incompatible, there are at present no powers to stop the Government proceeding. In addition, the promise does not apply to secondary legislation, potentially allowing existing EU-derived rights to be watered down with ease. The bulk of UK legislation to implement EU law is actually done by way of secondary legislation—for example, working time regulations, TUPE, and health and safety regulations, to name but a few.

On enforcement, I do welcome the commitments the Secretary of State has made to address funding deficiencies. I await further details in due course. On 1 April 2004, there were 1,483 Health and Safety Executive frontline inspectors; but by 2015 that had fallen to 972. In consequence, the statistically average workplace can now expect an inspection no more frequently than every 50 years.

I have conveyed to the Secretary of State in recent weeks the fact that for a guarantee of non-regression to be truly meaningful, it must be enforceable in the UK courts at the suit of any worker in the UK. Any dispute about whether or not the worker has less favourable rights than her EU comparator must be determined by the courts and not solely by Parliament, still less by a politically motivated Government majority in the House of Commons. Today’s proposals come nowhere near that and do not yet demonstrate that this Government take workplace rights seriously. I do hope, however, that, in this spirit of co-operation, we will work together to move towards more robust guarantees as a matter of urgency.

Greg Clark: I warmly welcome the tone in which the hon. Lady has approached this issue. We have different preferences on what would be ideal, and I know that both the TUC and her own Front-Bench colleagues would prefer EU directives automatically to take their place in UK law and to be enforced through the European Court of Justice, as they are now. She knows that we disagree with her on that—in our view, it would not be consistent with leaving the European Union or with the sovereignty of this Parliament—but I accept that that is her position and that she has said that, notwithstanding that, we should explore whether we can meet her perfectly reasonable observations. I am grateful for that.

What we are publishing this afternoon are draft clauses that have not yet gone into the Bill. I am open to working with all Members of the House—of course, continuing to include the hon. Lady—to see which of the observations can be accommodated, subject to the general approach we wish to take. I think that she recognises, and I hope other Members will recognise, that this is an important opportunity. If we are to pass a withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill, the chance to have on the statute book from the outset—literally within the next few weeks, I hope—some important protections for workers is one that I think we should all take.

The hon. Lady asked some specific questions, of which I shall attempt to answer as many as I can. She observed, in effect, that future Governments and Parliaments may take a different view from that which we intend. As we know, it is a fact that no Parliament can bind its successor, but it can express a clear intention, set up a test and provide mechanisms against which proper scrutiny of any proposal can be mounted, and that is what we are doing. I acknowledge her right hon. and hon. Friends’ contribution to and, in fact, origination of this idea.

The hon. Lady is concerned that the statements that are provided for could be ignored and may not be as effective as she intends. The case law clearly establishes that if a statutory consultation is provided for, it cannot be lightly swept aside. There is a requirement properly to engage with the recommendations that come from such a consultation, but I hear what she said about that process being open to workers as well as to people who might represent them. We can talk more about that.

The hon. Lady asked about the application to future changes to workers’ rights that may come outside primary legislation. Clearly, the big changes come through primary legislation, but in the spirit of what I said earlier, I am certainly open to exploring what assurances we can give on other significant pieces of legislation that might be in scope.

The hon. Lady mentioned the jurisprudence of the ECJ. It would clearly be inappropriate after Brexit for the ECJ to have a remit in the UK, but of course, as she knows as a lawyer herself, any court can have regard to the decisions of any court that it considers to be relevant in the case being considered.

The hon. Lady mentioned enforcement, on which we strongly agree. There are industries—sometimes concentrated in particular places in the country—in
which what she described is correct: a calculation is made that employers who abuse the rights of their workers are unlikely to be detected and enforced against, which leads them to think that they can get away with it with impunity. The intention behind the strengthened enforcement body that I described, and our intention in terms of resourcing it, is to firmly remove that idea from the mind of any such employer. I will work closely with the hon. Lady on that.

It is appropriate to recognise in the House and draw some pride from our record of employment rights. We have a successful labour market that combines a reputation for high standards—standards that have been recognised throughout the EU as being among the best in Europe—while having what is the most important right for workers, which is the right to work. Many more people in this country are able to work as a result of the effectiveness of our labour markets. We need to preserve that while giving expression to the objectives articulated by the hon. Lady’s colleagues, to make sure that the commitment we have given to build on that strength in future is something that is not just a matter of words but has parliamentary force behind it. I am grateful for what the hon. Lady said about working together.

**John Redwood** (Wokingham) (Con): I am assured that the Government and this Secretary of State want high standards of employment rules in this country, and I look forward to our having independence so that we can have our own domestically crafted high standards, which will be above the minimum EU standards, but will the Secretary of State please explain why he has proceeded with this statement? I thought its sole aim was to win over the Labour party, but it seems Labour is in complete disagreement with it.

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The Secretary of State started by talking about his party’s record on workers’ rights. He will forgive me for questioning whether the political party that put into legislation the Masters and Servants Act 1823, which codified corporal punishment for workers, has a good record on workers’ rights. Indeed, to bring us up to date, his party also introduced the anti-trade union Act.

Rather than guaranteeing or protecting workers’ rights, the statement does no such thing; in fact, it would be a misrepresentation to suggest otherwise. The Secretary of State will be aware that the EU is currently discussing regulations on the gig economy and rights for working parents that are far better than what can be found in the Government’s good work plan. If those EU regulations come to pass, how will the Government deal with them in this Chamber? Given that we keep being told that the next election is in 2022, is the Secretary of State committing the Government to at least matching EU regulations until then?

Given that the statutory instrument process is being used to weaken workers’ rights, as we saw recently with the denial of access to European works councils, what makes the Secretary of State believe that we should trust the Government on this? Will he, as a gesture of good will, table an amendable motion on the Government’s good work plan that will allow Members to strengthen regulations, particularly around zero-hours contracts and their elimination and sorting out workers’ status?

**Greg Clark**: On the good work plan, we will be introducing an employment Bill and it will of course be amendable, in the manner of legislation. We are provided, though, with a more immediate opportunity: that Bill is for the next Session, whereas I very much hope that the withdrawal Bill will be available during the weeks ahead and provide that immediate opportunity to express our determination to apply the commitment that the Prime Minister made on this issue.

The hon. Gentleman mentions the measures on the gig economy that are being contemplated by the European Union. Actually, that is a fine example of what I said earlier: those measures follow the commitments that we have made in the good work plan, and they are now making their way through Brussels. We were in advance of that. As I made clear in my statement, both those EU directives would go through the procedure that I described and would be available to the House, if Members thought there was anything extra in them. Actually, though, we think the directives are in many respects modelled on our own proposals.

On the ability of this House to enforce high standards, I say that that been the tradition. My experience as a Minister at European Councils over recent years is that our record of high standards when it comes to workers’ rights, employment protection and health and safety is looked at with admiration by many of our counterparts across the European Union. This allows us to continue that leadership.

**Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): I welcome this statement and the proposed clauses therein. As my right hon. Friend has been touching on this matter, does he agree that it is often the UK rather than the EU that has led the way not just on workers’ rights, but on environmental standards, and that we should be proud of that? Will he confirm that today’s announcements will ensure that we continue with these high standards in both areas and that we give due regard to any strengthening of environmental protections and regulations by the EU once we leave?

**Greg Clark**: My hon. Friend is quite right. Again, the provisions adopted by the Climate Change Act 2008 were not required by the European Union. They were a set of decisions that were taken by this House, and that has been our record. The proposals that I have set out...
allow us to continue to do that, while making sure that the House is not only properly informed but required to make an explicit determination that, if there are new policies that are adopted and directives that are proposed, they are debated and considered in this House. That seems to me to be a good mechanism to ensure that we are always aware of what is being done in the European Union after we have left it.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): Madam Deputy Speaker, you and I remember doing an all-nighter in this House when the Labour Government took through the national minimum wage. In fact, we were here all night long, until 9 o’clock in the morning, because both Conservatives and Liberal Democrats filibustered and voted against the national minimum wage. I am glad those days are behind us—at least the all-nighters. I do not need lectures from anyone about being wary of the Conservatives, but may I welcome the statement today by the Secretary of State and the response by the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), as we try to forge assurances enshrined in law to protect workers’ rights as we leave the EU? May I press the Secretary of State to say something more about how we will ensure that any changes on workers’ rights and health and safety are consulted on and that they are not cherry-picked by a future Government? May I also support the concerns of my hon. Friend about the right to judicial involvement for workers who want to make sure that those rights are upheld?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for having initiated this conversation through her amendment to the previous motion, and I think a fruitful discussion has come from that. On the ability to cherry-pick those measures that are adopted by the European Union that might find favour with the Government but not those that do not, the requirement would be to report everything that the European Union has adopted during a six-month period and for the Government to have to make a statement in respect to all of those measures. The motion that would then be required to be put before the House would be amendable. The Government might say that they intended to implement one measure, to apply in a different way another, but to reject a third. That motion would be amendable, so the House could alter the Government’s intention and express its view directly. As for the direct access for workers to these procedures, I made a commitment to the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) that we would work together to see what can be done on that, and I am sure that the right hon. Lady will want to be part of those conversations.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I actually whipped the minimum wage Bill through Committee on that occasion, so I well remember Conservative hostility to it.

What the Secretary of State is really promising today is future consultation and future opportunities for votes. Looking behind him, I do not see a great deal of commitment from those Benches to such measures. Why can he not go further? Why can he not agree to put a commitment into the withdrawal agreement and the treaty that the UK will never fall behind EU minimum standards on workers’ rights either now or in future?

I know that he has mentioned parliamentary sovereignty and not binding future Parliaments but, historically, Governments have negotiated treaties and Parliaments have approved them and those treaties are binding on future Parliaments until they choose to withdraw from them. Why can we not have that sort of arrangement?

Greg Clark: We are talking about legislation here, not the treaty, and the withdrawal agreement has already been established. In the future economic partnership, there is a negotiation to be conducted—it is specified there—on our level of alignment when it comes to workers’ rights, but this is in advance of that. This provides an opportunity at the point of withdrawal to give Parliament the ability to make sure that it takes an informed view of whether it wants to continue to be aligned. That is a valuable opportunity. The hon. Gentleman says that we should do it now with the treaty. That is part of the next phase of the negotiations. It is taking all the Government’s efforts to conclude the withdrawal agreement, without being able to conclude the future partnership in the next few weeks. But this is an important opportunity to establish, in primary legislation, a requirement properly to consider all new regulations that would come from the European Union and to assess the compatibility of legislation that we make in this House with that of the rest of the European Union. That, it seems to me, is a valuable opportunity.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Let me start by echoing the warm words of the Secretary of State about Kumar Bhattacharyya. The Jaguar plant in my constituency is open, employing more than 2,000 workers, in no small way due to his herculean efforts over many years to turn around Jaguar Land Rover.

In my previous being, on behalf of the Transport and General Workers’ Union, I took the case of the Eastbourne dustmen all the way to the European Court of Justice because a Conservative Government refused to apply the acquired rights directive to 6 million public servants. We won and TUPE was extended to those 6 million public servants. In future, however, there will not be the same enforcement mechanism. The trade union movement has spoken with one voice today. Frances O’Grady said that this will not protect rights and that there is nothing to stop future Governments from tearing up the legislation. She added that no one should be “taken in” and that our rights are “still under threat.” Does the Secretary of State understand that residual concern and that, crucially, unless the Government go significantly further with regard to legally enforceable rights, not just depending on the whims of future Governments, she is right: these guarantees are worthless?

Greg Clark: These rights will be enforceable by the UK courts. I meet Frances O’Grady very regularly. As I said to the shadow Secretary of State, I recognise that the TUC has a different preference, which is to continue to embed European rights directly and to have them enforced by the Court of Justice of the European Union. That is a different approach. In my view, it is not compatible with Brexit. Therefore, we are looking for a way in which this House, this Parliament and the UK courts can provide the guarantees that I think everyone in this House wants to give.
Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): Trust is a big issue here. In July 2016, the Prime Minister told the nation: “I want to see changes in the way that big business is governed...we’re going to have not just consumers represented on company boards, but workers as well.” Can the Secretary of State confirm that that promise to workers was broken?

Greg Clark: No, what the Prime Minister set out in that speech was to have the voice of workers represented in the boardroom. The action that we have taken in requiring businesses to establish a worker representative, or to have a non-executive director with the function of representing workers, or to have a works council with an influence on the board, was something that I was proud to set out in furtherance of the Prime Minister’s assurance.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I am sure that the Secretary of State can see that there is a little bit of a credibility gap to close. He said in his statement that the Prime Minister has given a commitment that Brexit will not be allowed to erode workers’ rights, so can he explain why both he and the Prime Minister last week voted in favour of statutory instruments that do exactly that?

Greg Clark: I am very proud of the record of this country and this Government in advancing rights in the workplace. The “Good Work” report by Matthew Taylor established, way before many other countries, a means of ensuring changes to UK law around the platform economy and the gig economy to ensure that people are not disadvantaged by these new platforms. The Prime Minister and I have both given that commitment. In deference to some of the scepticism that the words of the Prime Minister should be sufficient, this parliamentary mechanism to enshrine a degree of scrutiny and give this House the ability to insist that that non-regression is abided by is the basis of the amendment that was proposed, and that we are accepting and acting on today.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): They say that the Secretary of State is a very nice man. I do not know him. I am sure he is. But I do not trust the gang that he is part of.

I was a Member of the European Parliament from 1979 to 1984. Before that, I took a petition to the European Parliament in ’77, arguing for equal rights for men and women. I then became a member of the employment committee in the European Parliament, and I am glad to say that some of the things in that petition became law because of the European Parliament, not because of this place. You will know very well, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I was a shadow Employment Minister when the Opposition were working on the minimum wage. I know how hard we had to fight every inch of the way, because we were told that that was not possible, that it would cost jobs, that industry would not be able to afford it, and so on.

When there were big job losses in steel and coal, I was an MEP for one of the affected areas, and I took a group of steelworkers to Brussels to meet the Commission. The big criticism of the Government at that time was that the situation here was unlike that in Germany, where steelworkers were also losing their jobs, but every man in the steel industry in the Ruhr had another job to go to. In this country, there was no safety net. The criticism then was that there was a lack of social policy in this country. Why should I have faith that things have changed when I hear that the number of factory inspectors has diminished? If we do not have factory inspectors, we do not have people looking at the limitations in the industries. I would like to believe the Secretary of State, but I am sorry; I do not.

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for the compliment that she paid me. I would reflect on the facts. She mentioned that introducing the minimum wage was a fight. This House is used to having fights and campaigns. The purpose of this Chamber is to have crusades that are successful. She will know that, far from that innovation having been rescinded, it was a Conservative Government who introduced the national living wage, which was the biggest pay increase for low-paid workers in 20 years. She should take confidence in that.

The right hon. Lady refers to drawing these protections from the European Union. Once we leave the European Union, the basis for a framework of workers’ rights will obviously not be there, and the alternative is that there would simply be no reference to what is happening in the European Union; that would be the default. We are responding to some helpful suggestions from the right hon. Lady’s colleagues that this House should keep a close eye on what is happening in the rest of Europe and that there should be an ability for the House to act on that. That is a good idea. I cannot say that it was my idea originally—it was brought to my attention—but when we recognise a good idea, I think we should back it.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I recall, as an MP, taking a delegation of miners’ leaders to Brussels to argue for jobs and investment, but we were blocked by the state aid rules that the European Commission enforced on us under a Labour Government. That is why Harworth colliery in my constituency closed.

I welcome the Secretary of State’s openness in his statement—both to amendments from Labour Front Benchers over the next few days, if there are precise amendments and, if they are not agreed, to the ability to table amendments to the withdrawal Bill that can be voted on by Parliament.

I negotiated the derogation, under the Labour Government, for one section of workers from the Work at Height Regulations 2005 because of the way in which the Commission framed the legislation. When it comes to health and safety, will there be automatic harmonisation—in other words, we accept everything that comes, regardless of its suitability to specific industries and groups of workers? When it comes to health and safety and sometimes environmental standards, that has been a fundamental issue, and it would be one if we had direct harmonisation.

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his work in crafting this proposal, and I repeat the commitment to continue to work together as the draft clauses become clauses that are laid before the House. The procedures of this House allow substantial debate of those clauses in Committee and on Report. I agree
with his assessment. It is not the case that every regulation proposed by the European Union is ideal and well suited to our circumstances. From my experience in European Councils, there is a process that tries to apply a set of rules in many different countries and economies that may not actually be the best for the UK economy. The procedure that the hon. Gentleman has given us the ability to discuss today provides this House with a means by which to consider what the best form of regulation is, suited to our circumstances and respecting the sovereignty of this House and this Parliament.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** This is obviously an extremely important statement, but there is quite a lot of other business to get through this afternoon, so shorter questions and shorter answers might be in order.

**Alison McGovern** (Wirral South) (Lab): The Secretary of State speaks well and everybody wishes to listen to him. However, not all his colleagues are of the same mind. Before Christmas, the Attorney General stood at the Dispatch Box and boasted that the non-regression clauses in the deal are “not enforceable either by the EU institutions or by the arbitration arrangements under the withdrawal agreement.”—[Official Report, 3 December 2018; Vol. 650, c. 559.]

So why on earth should we trust these clauses?

**Jim Fitzpatrick** (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): The Secretary of State will accept that there is a lot of scepticism among Opposition Members about the Government’s integrity on this issue, and the fact that the trade unions were invited in so late in the Brexit process only fuels that. As he says, we have never solely relied on the EU for workers’ rights and legislation in this country, and when we leave the EU we will need a framework within which to work, so his statement is welcome. Other issues such as electronic balloting are important to the unions. Have they featured in his recent meetings with the unions? How would that demand, and others, fit into his attitude to discussions and communications with the unions in the context of his statement?

**Greg Clark:** I am grateful to the hon. Member for what he says. Of course, I meet the unions—both the TUC and individual unions—very regularly. My responsibilities there go beyond the matters we are discussing today, which are expressly about the European Union. The issue of balloting is outside of discussions on the European Union. It is important to have a good relationship with trade unions. When good ideas are put forward, whether they come from his side of the House or from the trade union movement should not prejudice their ability to be considered fairly and taken forward.

**Jo Swinson** (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): The Business Secretary knows, as I do, that he has Conservative colleagues who would like to see workers’ rights diluted or swept away in the name of deregulation, and—who knows?—one of them could be Prime Minister before long. Will he therefore confirm that the mechanisms he has outlined could be repealed by a future Government passing primary legislation? Is it not true that exchanging enduring EU protections on the environment and workers’ rights for these flimsy mechanisms is like trading in a car that has a lifetime guarantee for a lemon without a log book just because the floor mats are thrown in?

**Greg Clark:** I disagree with the hon. Lady. I would say that there are far more of my colleagues who recognise the benefits for the UK of being a country and a jurisdiction that is associated with high standards rather than a race to the bottom, and that that is the way we will prosper as a country. I think she should have a little more faith in that.

On the hon. Lady’s point about a future Government being able to repeal the whole lot, she knows enough about the British constitution to know that that is available for every law, in every circumstance, by every House of Commons following every election.

**Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I cautiously welcome the statement by the Secretary of State. I think that we owe it to him to recognise the sincerity with which he has approached the discussions with our Front Benchers, with other Labour Members and with trade unions to try to seek some form of compromise—because that is what this is. It does not meet the gold standard of my private Member’s Bill—I recognise that—but there is much to be welcomed, including the facility of an amendable and votable motion. However, there remains a fundamental issue of trust that he cannot have failed to notice, and I suggest that he may need to do further work to try to reassure more people, specifically, perhaps—this is one of the issues that the TUC has raised—on the fact that statements from the Government might be made only in relation to primary legislation, whereas many employment changes come through secondary legislation. What assurance can he offer to the TUC?

**Greg Clark:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for what she says. As I said to the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), most of these rights derive from primary legislation. We will see whether there is an ability to provide the assurance that the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) seeks.

I am grateful to the hon. Lady for the contribution made by her private Member’s Bill. She has done the painstaking work of producing a great schedule of directives to which her Bill would apply. I propose—I hope she will not mind—that we plagiarise that and
introduce it as the basis for our list of directives so that we can, if not replicate it in all respects, at least capture the spirit of her Bill.

Greg Clark: I will not do that, because one of the conclusions of the Matthew Taylor report was that most people, of the small—and, indeed, shrinking—number of people on zero-hours contracts welcome that flexibility. The hon. Gentleman will know that many Labour councils up and down the country have casual workers on those contracts and say, in terms, that they are an important part of what their workers want.

However, I do agree with the hon. Gentleman on enforcement. A number of firms are doing such things, but they are not typical, by any means. Some of us will have read about some of the abuses in the garment industry in and around Leicester, for example. These simply cannot be allowed to continue without the steps being taken to restore confidence to those workers that their rights will be respected. That is the intention behind what I have set out in terms of strengthening and better resourcing our enforcement mechanisms.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Fresh in the minds of those of us who feel scepticism about the commitments made by the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister will be the fact that his party, in coalition with the Liberal Democrats, introduced employment tribunal fees, which were ruled unlawful by the Supreme Court, largely because of their hugely disproportionate impact on women bringing cases on maternity discrimination. Can the Secretary of State confirm that, contrary to comments made by the permanent secretary at the Ministry of Justice, his Government have absolutely no plans to reintroduce employment tribunal fees?

Greg Clark: I can report to the hon. Lady that employers, including in her constituency, are very anxious that we should get on and approve this deal because, as I said, the best right that a worker has is the right to work. The concerns that come from the uncertainty of not agreeing a deal that has been endorsed by employers is giving cause for concern to many workers up and down the country. I hope that in the days ahead, as well as advancing this package, which will provide a means for us to have regard to and take decisions on workers’ rights, and as we see what happens in the rest of the European Union, we will also act to safeguard the jobs of workers in her constituency and mine by approving the deal.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): The Prime Minister previously told the House that one step the Government were taking was to abolish the so-called Swedish derogation, but can the Secretary of State confirm that in the regulations laid before the House today, agency workers will be forced to wait until 2020, at the earliest, for equal rights in the workplace?

Greg Clark: Having made the commitment to abolish the Swedish derogation, which previous Labour Governments signally failed to do, we have brought forward, at the earliest opportunity, a statutory instrument to do that. I have had representations from the trade unions as to the timing, and we will reflect on that. However, I think that the hon. Lady, being fair-minded, would acknowledge that we have brought forward the necessary legislation very quickly in response to the policy commitments that we have made.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): As well as echoing other tributes paid today, I would like to pay tribute to Lord Davies of Coity, who died on Monday. He was a duly champion of workers and workers’ rights for many decades.

Problems with enforcement of employment rights are not just in particular areas, but are widespread and particularly affect young workers, careworkers and catering sector workers, many of whom work in my constituency and have few other options for employment. I welcome the Secretary of State looking again to expand the enforcement of employment rights. Will he commit to group cases being taken to tribunal and to third-party representations being made to HMRC about the minimum wage?

Greg Clark: First, I echo the hon. Lady’s condolences. She tempts me to go beyond my jurisdiction. My portfolio is pretty broad, covering energy, industry and the industrial strategy, but she refers to matters that are, properly, for the Ministry of Justice. I am happy to talk to the Lord Chancellor and meet the hon. Lady if she would like to talk about such grouping of cases.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Has the Secretary of State secured the endorsement of any trade unions for his proposed course of action? If not, what does he propose to do to secure it?

Greg Clark: My ambition is not to secure the endorsement of trade unions. We have had fruitful discussions. As I said to the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), I respect the fact
that the trade unions would rather things were done in a different way—namely, that we continue to import, as it were, directives and regulations from the European Union and have them enforced by the European Court of Justice. That is their preferred policy; I understand that. It is certainly not our policy. I do not think it is compatible with leaving the European Union. However, leaving the European Union and the opportunity to put in statute various measures, which will allow the House to consider actions that we take on employment rights, does not mean that we cannot establish agreement across the House and take the advice of the trade union movement, even though it might ultimately prefer a different solution.

Point of Order

2.42 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have been contacted by residents in Camellia House in my constituency, who are distraught at being left without a lift for the last two months, which is causing great stress to many residents, and particularly those with young families or disabilities. The situation has now become more serious, with one of the residents, who has had a stroke, now being discharged from hospital. FirstPort has failed to provide any explanation for the delay or any compensation to residents. It has also failed to respond to inquiries from my office since the issue was first raised with the company on 25 January.

Madam Deputy Speaker, what advice can you give me on how to raise that matter in order to get Ministers’ attention, so that pressure can be applied to FirstPort to get the lift fixed and FirstPort can be held to account for its clear disregard for residents and their needs?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order and for giving me notice that she intended to raise it. I am sure we are all sorry to hear of the plight facing her constituents, but I hope she will understand that it is not a matter on which I can rule. However, she has placed her concerns on the record, which I am sure will be appreciated. As I am sure she knows, she could go to the Table Office for advice on the other ways in which she can raise that matter on behalf of her constituents.

BILL PRESENTED

SCHOOL UNIFORM (GENDER NEUTRALITY) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Layla Moran, supported by Jo Swinson, Wera Hobhouse, Christine Jardine, Caroline Lucas, Hannah Bardell and Mhairi Black, presented a Bill to require school uniform policies to be gender-neutral; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March, and to be printed (Bill 350).
Charity Trustees (Time Off for Duties)

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

2.44 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend the Employment Rights Act 1996 to give charity trustees the right to time off work for the purposes of carrying out the duties of that office; and for connected purposes.

Charity trustees are the people across the length and breadth of our country who volunteer their time and expertise to provide governance for our nation’s charities, large and small. They deserve our thanks—I do not think anyone would disagree with that—but warm words on their own are not enough, which is why I am introducing this ten-minute rule Bill.

The Charity Trustees (Time Off for Duties) Bill has two clear purposes. The first is to value our existing charity trustees by giving them an improved status in law. The second is to provide the sort of support that might encourage a greater number of people from a wider diversity of backgrounds to take on this important but unpaid civic duty.

I am delighted that the Bill has been commended widely, and I would like to put on record my particular thanks to the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations, the Small Charities Coalition and the Wales Council for Voluntary Action for their support. I would also like to thank the Members from different political parties who are the Bill’s co-sponsors.

As the law stands, an employee can take a reasonable amount of time off work if they are a magistrate, school governor, local councillor or one of eight other categories of duty. Those categories do not include the role of charity trustee. This Bill seeks to change that. Let me be clear: this is the most moderate of Bills. I am not asking for a higher status in law for charity trustees than for those who undertake any of the other public duties already covered by statute. Under the existing legislation, one has the right to “reasonable” time off to carry out certain public duties. There is, of course, no requirement that it be paid time off.

“Reasonableness” decres that the amount of time off must be agreed with the employer before taking it and that the employer can refuse a request if it is unreasonable. The law will depend on what duties need to be carried out, the time it will take, the impact on the employer’s business and how much time has already been taken. Moreover, staff cannot ask for time off work for public duties if they are agency workers, members of the police or armed forces, employed on a fishing vessel or a gas or oil rig at sea, merchant seamen, or civil servants if their public duties are connected to political activities restricted under the terms of their employment. The existing terms for “reasonable time off for public duties” would be totally unchanged by the Bill. The only change that the Bill seeks is to extend those terms to charity trustees, and that is not before time.

We cannot overestimate the importance of charity trustees in our society. Section 177 of the Charities Act 2011 defines trustees as “the persons having the general control and management of the administration of a charity.” Trustees are ultimately responsible for everything a charity does and can be held legally accountable for the decisions they make. Trustees freely give their own time, energy and expertise to help charities achieve their aims, and the contribution they make to civil society and our country is vital. While it is difficult—and, probably impossible—to put an exact monetary value on the contribution that trustees make to society, statistics from “Taken on Trust”, the 2017 report published by the Charity Commission, show that the estimated time value of trustee input per year is £3.5 billion.

Research from the National Council for Voluntary Organisations has found that 91% of charities rely solely on the work of volunteers. Many of these charities are community-based, and a significant proportion do amazing work to help tackle poverty and deprivation. Trustees often play both a governance and executive role. Without their trustees, these vitally needed charities simply could not exist. If these charities were not there, either the state would have to undertake the work, or no one would do so, with all the human and economic costs that would entail.

The Small Charities Coalition asked its members if they would be supportive of this ten-minute rule Bill. The respondents were supportive and believe that the change would not only be beneficial to current trustees, but help small charities to attract new ones. This is something I believe we must aspire to.

The House of Lords Select Committee on Charities report “Stronger charities for a stronger society” expressed its concerns about the lack of diversity among charity trustees, which it saw as limiting the experience and knowledge of charity boards. The Charity Commission’s report “Taken on Trust” made a similar point when it stated that the average trustee is a 62-year-old white British male. Research by the Charities Aid Foundation—“Charity Street II”—found that young people and women are the most likely to use charity services, but there are double the number of male trustees as there are female ones, with charity trustees tending to have an above average income and level of education. A report from the agency Inclusive Boards found that the boards of charities in England and Wales are less diverse than those of FTSE 100 companies.

Today, I want to celebrate both our existing and our prospective trustees. If a 62-year-old white British male trustee is reading this in Hansard or watching BBC Parliament, I want to assure them that this House values their service. However, I would like that service to be enhanced by that of a wider range of people. Without this, I believe that charities will miss out on the huge range of skills, experience and perspectives that a wider pool of trustees could offer.

I also believe that we should take seriously the fact that whole swathes of the population are currently under-represented as charity trustees, and are losing out on the wealth of development opportunities that being a trustee provides. That is simply not good enough. Charities could greatly benefit from having young people on their boards, particularly in the ever more digital world we now live in, while being a charity trustee enables young people to develop key employability skills, interact with people outside their usual social groups and broaden their networks.
Trusteeships offer a rare opportunity for people to gain board level experience early in their careers or even before their career has fully begun. The best companies are already leading the way by supporting their employees as they take on trustee roles. They welcome the part that charity trusteeships can play in offering their staff vital board level experience. I believe it is essential that such experience is offered widely.

John Gallanders, chief officer of the Association of Voluntary Organisations in Wrexham, makes the point that this experience should not just be for those who are on middle-management levels or above, commenting: “what is the difference between a parent who is a School Governor getting time off and someone who may be lower down in the staff structure perhaps wanting time for a playgroup meeting?”

I agree totally.

There was a time when the words “big society” were used quite a lot in this place, but I do not want us to get bogged down with the terminology of the day or the semantics of how we on different sides of the House sometimes use different words. Whatever words we use, I have no doubt that a society that values and supports its charity trustees is a bigger and a better one, so I commend this Bill to the House. I hope, too, that this House will support it, and that the Government will act.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Susan Elan Jones, Julie Elliott, Lilian Greenwood, Jo Stevens, Jeremy Lefroy, Tonia Antoniazzi, Mary Glindon, Victoria Prentis, Stephen Timms, Daniel Zeichner, Gareth Thomas and Wera Hobhouse present the Bill.

Susan Elan Jones accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March, and to be printed (Bill 351).

Comptroller and Auditor General


2.55 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I beg to move,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that Her Majesty will appoint Gareth Davies to the Office of Comptroller and Auditor General.

I would like to start by paying tribute to the outgoing Comptroller and Auditor General, Sir Amyas Morse, who has led the National Audit Office since 2009. The past decade has been a period of great change in the public finances, during which Sir Amyas has served with distinction, displaying the independence and professionalism that have been the hallmarks of his career. He has now reached the end of his non-renewable term, and I am sure I speak for the whole House when I thank him for his service and wish him the very best for his future endeavours.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): May I as a Back Bencher, but also as a Select Committee Chair who drew on Sir Amyas' services, record one aspect of him that so struck me, which was his attitude to public service? He had a golden DNA that ran through him, with a knowledge and a certainty about how he should serve this House and, through this House, the public. However friendly one got with him—one might be on Christian name terms—one knew it meant nothing if he did not think something was the right thing to do.

The Prime Minister: As I have said, Sir Amyas's professionalism and integrity shone through the work that he did and, as a Select Committee Chairman, the right hon. Gentleman knows that and has experienced it at first hand.

In line with the Budget Responsibility and National Audit Act 2011, the appointment of Sir Amyas's successor, Gareth Davies, has been agreed with the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier). With three decades of audit experience, gained in both the public and private sectors, Mr Davies is eminently qualified to be our 17th permanent Comptroller and Auditor General, a position he will hold for a non-renewable term of 10 years.

I am sure that, under Mr Davies's leadership, the National Audit Office will continue its proud history of rigorous and independent scrutiny of Government, and that the people of the United Kingdom can have every confidence that their taxes will continue to be spent in an effective and proper manner. Mr Davies will be a worthy servant of this House and this country. I am delighted to support his appointment, and I commend this motion to the House.

2.58 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I rise to offer the Opposition's backing to the appointment of Mr Gareth Davies as Comptroller and Auditor General. The position was initiated by William Gladstone, a Liverpoolian at birth
who lived at Seaforth in what is now my constituency of Bootle and actually went to school in Bootle at one point.

The importance of the position is reflected by the fact that the Prime Minister is in attendance and has formally moved this appointment. Similarly, its significance is demonstrated by the rigorous vetting process undertaken by the Chair and members of the Public Accounts Committee. This reflects the central role parliamentary Select Committees play in modernising Parliament, ensuring that the appointments made by Governments of whatever colour receive proper parliamentary scrutiny.

As the chief executive of the National Audit Office, the work of the Comptroller and Auditor General cannot be overestimated. The NAO provides an indispensable role in independently auditing Government Departments, ensuring financial transparency and good value for money, as was mentioned by the Prime Minister.

I know that I speak for all Members when I say that the NAO’s work is vital in establishing an accurate picture of Government spending and in helping Members to properly hold Ministers to account. That work will be more important than ever as Ministers continue to spend increasing amounts of public money in preparation for no deal, with appropriate oversight from this House. I have no doubt that the new Comptroller and Auditor General will continue the forensic examination of accounts that we have all come to respect and that I hope the Government and their Departments—particularly those that have “Transport” in their name—will recognise, now and in the future. At this pressing time, the NAO’s workload will be made even heavier by the Government’s departmental spending review, which may put more strains upon services.

I echo the Prime Minister’s tribute to the outgoing Comptroller and Auditor General, Sir Amyas Morse. He has served with distinction under difficult circumstances, given that under his tenure the NAO has not found itself protected from cuts to resources and staffing.

Let me turn to the appointment of Mr Davies, who has more than 30 years of mixed experience as a public auditor, including work with local public services, central Government and the charity sector. The Opposition support the recommendation of the cross-party Public Accounts Committee and its satisfaction “that Mr Davies has suitable audit and professional experience and demonstrates the necessary independence and resilience to make a success of the role.”

It goes without saying that Mr Davies is taking over the position at a difficult time and has an important task ahead. However, the Opposition are confident that he will perform his role with distinction and diligence. On behalf of the Opposition, I wish him well.

3.1 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I am delighted to catch your eye in this important but short debate, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I first served on the Public Accounts Committee between 1997 and 1999, under the chairmanship of my right hon. Friend, the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (Mr Davis). Since September 2017, I have served as its deputy Chairman. There is probably only one other Member of this House—my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr Bacon), who is sitting beside me—who has served on the PAC during the tenure of both Sir John Bourn, the previous Comptroller and Auditor General, and Sir Amyas Morse, the current holder of that office. Of course, they were both very different. In some ways the job has evolved with changing circumstances, such as the review of the whole of Government accounts, but in other ways it has not; the NAO’s basic auditing function and its value-for-money reports are exactly the same as when I first joined the PAC. Each CAG and each Chairman of the PAC has different ways of working.

Under the excellent chairmanship of my hon. Friend—as I call her for this purpose—the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), the CAG and the NAO are much more available to give briefings to Members and answer their queries than they ever were in the old days. The briefing session before each PAC hearing and the appointment of lead members has made the Committee’s huge workload—with public sessions twice weekly—manageable for its members. It also means that they are able to specialise, so the Committee’s work is much more professional. Together with the excellent work of the NAO, those changes have led to the Government accepting approximately 80% of PAC recommendations.

Departments could and should make better use of the information that the PAC and the NAO provide. The PAC is probably the most important Select Committee in this House and it’s whole raison d’être is to scrutinise the entirety of Government expenditure. That is reinforced by the convention that its Chairman is always an Opposition Member.

The CAG is a parliamentary appointment that is then approved by the Government, as in the motion so graciously moved today by the Prime Minister. I thank her for being present, given all the multifarious and difficult responsibilities that she has at the moment. Her presence demonstrates just how important an appointment it is.

That brings me to the appointment of the 17th Comptroller and Auditor General, Mr Gareth Davies. Having chaired his pre-appointment hearing at the PAC on 21 January, I have no hesitation in endorsing his appointment. There was an extremely strong shortlist, but he emerged as the best candidate. The CAG is instrumental to ensuring that Parliament is able to carry out its financial scrutiny of the Executive via the PAC, with the support of the NAO, so the vacant post was advertised to a very wide talent pool. The shortlisted candidates then underwent a technical assessment with the Auditor General for Scotland and extensive interviews and testing with a diverse panel of NAO staff. The process was stringent, and I believe that it has found an excellent successor to Sir Amyas Morse.

There can be no doubt about how eminently qualified Gareth Davies is for the job. He has more than 30 years’ experience as a public auditor and has worked at a senior level both in public services and in central Government. A University of Cambridge mathematics graduate, he qualified as a chartered accountant in 1992 and then worked in audit for several local authorities across London and the South-east, as well as for the Department of Health. Since 2012, he has served as head of public services at Mazars LLP, before which he was a managing director at the Audit Commission.
It would be wrong not to record my thanks to the departing CAG, Sir Amyas Morse, for his unparalleled work. Under his tenure, the National Audit Office has been at the forefront of scrutinising the Government’s preparedness for exiting the European Union, so it has been influential in shedding light on the scale of the task that lies ahead. Where necessary, Sir Amyas has been unflinching in his criticism of the actions of Government Ministers, or the Government as a whole. It has been an immense pleasure to work with him, and I wish him well in whatever he decides to do in the future. He was not only extremely technically qualified for the CAG’s work, but unfailingly courteous. He will be missed.

3.6 pm

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): As other Members have done, I thank the Prime Minister for coming to the Chamber today to move the motion. It is a symbol of the importance of the Comptroller and Auditor General’s role that it is supported both by the Prime Minister and by myself, as a representative of the Opposition and as Chair of the Public Accounts Committee. I am honoured to chair the Committee, but it is only 157 years old, whereas there has been a Comptroller and Auditor General in some form for considerably longer.

The position that we are approving today is a constitutionally significant one, because the Comptroller and Auditor General has to deal with whichever Government are in power. They need to be fearless and strong in their attention to how the Government spend the taxpayer’s money, manage projects that deliver for the citizen and ensure that they are being done as well as they can be. It is therefore important that we appoint someone with backbone, robustness and serious experience. Interestingly, this is the only time in the position’s history that we have required applicants to hold a financial qualification—although the incumbent, Sir Amyas Morse, does have such a qualification.

I am reminded today of Sir Amyas’s comment that it is not his job to be popular. It is important that the Comptroller and Auditor General be able to stand up for what they believe is right, based on the facts and the numbers, and ensure that the House is provided with the real numbers so that we can debate the issues.

I am delighted that the hon. Members for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) and for South Norfolk (Mr Bacon) are present. They have both served as my deputy Chair, a role that I created for Members of the Government party. As parliamentarians committed to scrutiny, we recognise the importance of the Committee’s work, whichever party is in power. It is important that we have the decent information that the National Audit Office provides.

As my party’s Front-Bench spokesperson, my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), noted, the Comptroller and Auditor General is also the NAO’s chief executive, so it is important that they have the ability to lead an organisation of some 800 people. In that respect, Gareth Davies also has my confidence.

I put on record my thanks to the outgoing Comptroller and Auditor General, whose term of office is limited to 10 years and will come to an end on 31 May; Gareth Davies is due to take over on 1 June, if his letters patent are issued. Sir Amyas has been a fearless advocate for what is good in the public sector and for challenging Governments of whatever party—he has worked under different Governments of different hues—to ensure that Parliament is provided with the information that it needs to engage in scrutiny.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): May I add a word of appreciation for Sir Amyas’s accessibility to me and other Back Benchers who are not members of the Public Accounts Committee?

Meg Hillier: I thank my right hon. Friend for that comment. It is certainly my ambition, as well as the NAO’s, that the information and support that it provides should be available to all Back Benchers, so that all Members of this House can properly scrutinise whichever Government are in power. With a 10-year term it is possible, as it has been with Sir Amyas Morse, that the new Comptroller and Auditor General will deal with Governments of different political hues. I am confident in his robustness, his steel, his ability and desire to call out what is right and truthful, and his straight approach to his profession. As others have mentioned, he has been an auditor for 30 years. He is highly experienced, highly capable and I highly recommend him.

3.9 pm

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier). I would like to make two quick points.

The first point is about Sir Amyas Morse, who has been Comptroller and Auditor General for 10 years. I was one of those who cross-examined him when he appeared before the Public Accounts Committee before he was appointed. He has done an extraordinarily good job over 10 years and built up the National Audit Office, from a good position under his predecessors, to a point where it is now without question one of the best supreme audit institutions in the world, if not the best supreme audit institution in the world. He is widely respected both here and internationally. It is quite fair to say that he really has done the state some service. We are all deeply in his debt.

My second point is about the consequences of the abolition of the Audit Commission and the fact that we are now appointing, in Mr Gareth Davies, an individual of the highest calibre who has spent most of his life at the Audit Commission. Following the abolition of the Audit Commission, there are concerns about the departmental understanding of the picture emerging from local audit work. Indeed, as Mr Davies said in his evidence, referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), there is still a risk that, even when things are being flagged up by the local auditor, either the governance of the authority itself or the Department are not acting quickly enough to pick up and address those points.

My concern was that there might be, either in slow time or in quick time, a move to burden the NAO with a whole load of extra responsibilities, frankly swamping it with the work of local government audit. In fact, the work of local government audit is being done quite effectively. There is no evidence that it is not being done well. However, there is evidence that it is not being
picked up quickly enough and, where local auditors are issuing qualifications, the Department of State concerned, in this case the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, is not necessarily responding quickly enough. Under the new Secretary of State, who has been in office for nine or 10 months, I am confident that changes are afoot, particularly since the debacle of Northamptonshire County Council. I just wanted to make the point that it is very important that we do not take an extremely good institution that is well-run and functioning extremely well, and try to extend its scope unnecessarily. I was therefore very relieved when I read Mr Davies’s other evidence where he said:

“When an organisation like the NAO demonstrates its capability, it is very tempting to give it additional tasks, and if you are not careful you can lose focus on your prime objectives.”

I was very gratified to see that he is extremely cautious about doing that. I commend his wisdom, evident in the evidence he gave to my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds, and I commend his appointment as Comptroller and Auditor General.

3.13 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Madam Deputy Speaker, as you know I am a newer Member to this House. There is no better apprenticeship for being an MP than sitting on the Public Accounts Committee. I would like to start by placing on the record my thanks to the hon. Members for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) and for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) for chairing our Committee so ably.

Without the National Audit Office and without the robustness of its reports, we could not do the job we do quite as well as we do. I pay tribute to Sir Amyas Morse who, right from the get-go, has been—the hon. Member for The Cotswolds said exactly this—unfailingly courteous. That is the first thing one notices about him: that easy smile. Behind that, however, is an intelligence of steel. He has a knack for calling out obfuscation, fudge and imprecision in our civil service, but also a reputation for being completely fair. That is exactly what we in the Public Accounts Committee aim to do. I will genuinely miss him and I wish him all the very best.

I am looking forward very much to working with Gareth Davies. We grilled him. Believe me, we did not give him an easy ride when he came before the Committee for his appointment. I was interested to know in particular, as a trustee of Oxfam and Save the Children, what part he had played in their recent scandals and what he had learnt from them. I have absolute confidence that that and all his other experience will bring great things to the NAO. I very much look forward to working with him.

Point of Order

3.14 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Before I proceed to the main business, I wish to clarify the comments I made earlier today to the House during Northern Ireland questions in response to a question raised by the hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly), which I believe may have been open to misinterpretation.

At oral questions, I referred to deaths during the troubles caused by members of the security forces. The point I was seeking to convey was that the overwhelming majority of those who served carried out their duties with courage, professionalism, integrity and within the law. I was not referring to any specific cases, but expressing a general view. Of course, where there is evidence of wrongdoing it should always be investigated, whoever is responsible. These are of course matters for the police and prosecuting authorities who are independent of Government.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Secretary of State for her point of order.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the Secretary of State for her gracious clarification of her position. Will she take this opportunity to recognise that confidence in the judicial process is fundamental to all communities and all people across Northern Ireland? For those reasons, her clarification that those who have committed criminal offences will face the justice process is important and it emphasises the need to move on quickly with the legacy commitments brought about by the 2014 Stormont House agreement.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the Secretary of State for her point of order and for giving me advance notice of her intention to make it. I am sure the fact that she has come to the House very quickly to make that clarification will be appreciated. I also understand the point made by the Opposition spokesman. I do not want to reopen the debate we had earlier. The point of order has been noted and the Secretary of State has made her clarification.

NORTHERN IRELAND (REGIONAL RATES AND ENERGY) (NO. 2) BILL

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the Northern Ireland (Regional Rates and Energy) (No. 2) Bill:

Timetable

(1) (a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be taken at today’s sitting in accordance with this Order.

(b) Notices of Amendments, new Clauses or new Schedules to be moved in Committee of the whole House may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before the Bill has been read a second time.

(c) Proceedings on Second Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) four hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(d) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading...
shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) six hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

**Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put**

(2) When the Bill has been read a second time:

(a) it shall, despite Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put;

(b) the Speaker shall leave the Chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

(3) (a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chairman shall report the Bill to the House without putting any Question.

(b) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

(4) If, following proceedings in Committee of the whole House and any proceedings on Consideration of the Bill, a legislative grand committee withholds consent to the Bill or any Clause or Schedule of the Bill or any amendment made to the Bill, the House shall proceed to Reconsideration of the Bill without any Question being put.

(5) If, following Reconsideration of the Bill:

(a) a legislative grand committee withholds consent to any Clause or Schedule of the Bill or any amendment made to the Bill (but does not withhold consent to the whole Bill and, accordingly, the Bill is amended in accordance with Standing Order No. 83N(6)), and

(b) a Minister of the Crown indicates his or her intention to move a minor or technical amendment to the Bill, the House shall proceed to consequential Consideration of the Bill without any Question being put.

(6) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (1), the Chairman or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply:

(a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;

(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;

(c) the Question on any amendment, new Clause or new Schedule selected by the Chair or Speaker for separate decision;

(d) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(e) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded; and shall not put any other questions, other than the question on any motion described in paragraph (17)(a) of this Order.

(7) On a Motion so made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Chairman or Speaker shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

(8) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (6)(d) on successive amendments moved or Motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Chairman or Speaker shall instead put a single Question in relation to those amendments or Motions.

(9) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (6)(e) in relation to successive provisions of the Bill, the Chairman shall instead put a single Question in relation to those provisions, except that the Question shall be put separately on any Clause of or Schedule to the Bill which a Minister of the Crown has signified an intention to leave out.

**Consideration of Lords Amendments**

(10) (a) Any Lords Amendments to the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(11) Paragraphs (2) to (11) of Standing Order No. 83F (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (10) of this Order.

**Subsequent stages**

(12) (a) Any further Message from the Lords on the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(13) Paragraphs (2) to (9) of Standing Order No. 83G (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (12) of this Order.

**Reasons Committee**

(14) Paragraphs (2) to (6) of Standing Order No. 83H (Programme orders: reasons committee) apply in relation to any committee to be appointed to draw up reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with this Order.

**Miscellaneous**

(15) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply so far as necessary for the purposes of this Order.

(16) Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply in relation to any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(17) (a) No Motion shall be made, except by a Minister of the Crown, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken, to recommit the Bill or to vary or supplement the provisions of this Order.

(b) No notice shall be required of such a Motion.

(c) Such a motion may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(d) The Question on such a Motion shall be put forthwith; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (c) shall thereupon be resumed.

(e) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on such a Motion.

(18) (a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings to which this Order applies except by a Minister of the Crown.

(b) The Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

(19) No debate shall be held in accordance with Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) at today’s sitting after this Order has been agreed.

(20) Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(21) No private business may be considered at today’s sitting after this Order has been agreed.—(Karen Bradley.)
Northern Ireland (Regional Rates and Energy) (No. 2) Bill

Second Reading

3.17 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I rise to ask the House to give a Second Reading to a piece of proposed legislation that delivers on this Government’s commitment to ensure good governance and stable public finances in Northern Ireland. The Bill seeks to achieve those outcomes by bringing forward two essential measures. First, it will enable the collection of regional rates in Northern Ireland. Secondly, it will ensure that fair and appropriate tariffs and cost-capping measures are in place for the renewable heat incentive scheme in Northern Ireland.

As we discussed yesterday, the Government are committed to devolution. I am working hard to restore devolved government in Northern Ireland at the earliest opportunity. I firmly believe that this is the best long-term plan for the people of Northern Ireland and I profoundly believe it is in the best long-term interests of the Union. Important local decisions should be taken by locally elected politicians in Northern Ireland. I share the frustration felt by some Members of Parliament and the public that taking forward important proposed legislation in this manner in this House is not the ideal situation. However, in the absence of devolved government I have made it clear that I will continue to take the urgent and necessary decisions to ensure good governance and to protect public services.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Secretary of State will recall that during the passage of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018, we raised an urgent issue that crystallises at the end of this month: the forthcoming resources available to our housing associations in Northern Ireland. Because of an Office for National Statistics definitional issue, they would not have been able to draw down on financial transactions capital tax. Will she confirm today that Her Majesty’s Treasury has agreed to extend the derogation on that definition and that legislation will be brought forward in this Parliament to resolve this issue satisfactorily, so that our housing associations and co-ownership and other schemes have the funding available that will not impact on our block grant, but will allow people to have a sustainable future home in the Province?

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that important issue. It is clear that the derogation needs to and will continue, but that is not a long-term, sustainable solution. As he will know, the Northern Ireland civil service is putting together legislation and we await copies of that so that action can be taken.

Gavin Robinson: I am very grateful for that response. I understand that the legislation is there and is ready to be brought forward. Will the Secretary of State confirm that subject to parliamentary business, it will be introduced as soon as possible, and before the summer?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman may have more information than me. All I can say is that we know the Northern Ireland civil service is looking at that and we will act appropriately at the appropriate time.

The measures in the Bill are limited yet necessary interventions in Northern Ireland. They provide the certainty and support that Northern Ireland Departments and, indeed, the wider public need and deserve for the year ahead. I will now give more detail on the measures.

Clause 1 addresses the collection of the regional rate. The UK Government have set the Northern Ireland regional rate in the absence of an Executive for the past two years. The level of rate to be applied this year was set out in my budget statement to Parliament last week. As part of the wider budget package of support to Northern Ireland for the 2019-20 financial year, the UK Government have set a 3% plus inflation increase on the domestic rate and an inflation-only increase on the non-domestic rate.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): The Secretary of State outlined the percentage rise in the regional rate. I will say something about that in my speech if I am called later, Madam Deputy Speaker, but will the Secretary of State say something to the House about how the 3% was arrived at?

Karen Bradley: Throughout the whole budgetary process, we have ensured that we have liaised with the main parties in Northern Ireland and politicians to make sure that we reflect both the priorities of the programme for government that was in place before the Executive collapsed and the priorities of the politicians of Northern Ireland. Clearly, an increase in the regional rate was needed to meet the budget gap. It is quite right that, as well as the Treasury providing additional money to bridge the gap in the budget, the people of Northern Ireland should make a contribution towards the public services that they receive, and 3% was an appropriate number.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): The retailers organisation, Retail NI, has expressed disappointment at the rates, and has argued that Northern Ireland businesses would be paying the highest business rates in the UK. Will the Secretary of State give some words of sympathy or encouragement to them?

Karen Bradley: I understand the concerns that have been raised; I have met Retail NI and others. Clearly, we are only increasing business rates in line with inflation, but a number of measures are available to businesses in my constituency that are not available to businesses in Northern Ireland. That is as a result of Northern Ireland not having an Executive to deliver those. This comes back to the point that we discussed at length yesterday: what we need is an Executive to deliver on the programmes, incentives and support that are available, as is right and appropriate for Northern Ireland. It may be that what is needed in Northern Ireland is not the same as the incentives in Great Britain.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way; she is being very generous with her time. On the domestic rate—the 3% plus inflation; so 4%, there or thereabouts—clearly some residents in Northern Ireland will be able to afford that based on their income, but lots of people living in Northern Ireland are on the minimum wage in low-income families, so will she set out for the House what support she will put in place so that there is some sort of relief to meet the costs of that rise?
Karen Bradley: What we are doing today is setting the rate. We are not setting any of the relief or allowances or support that is already available. Nothing that is there is changing and we are not able to change anything with the Bill. We are just setting the rate, but the hon. Gentleman is right that there may be things that people in Northern Ireland would like to see. Again, if there were Ministers in Stormont, they could do the right thing for Northern Ireland. It would be wrong to transpose the situation for councils in England, Wales or Scotland to Northern Ireland because it needs specific measures, and only Ministers in Northern Ireland can appropriately and properly deliver those.

This approach to regional rates, and therefore the measures in the Bill, represent an important contribution to delivering a sustainable budget for 2019-20. The second element of the Bill concerns the administration of Northern Ireland’s renewable heat incentive scheme. I must make it clear that the UK Government have not taken the decisions on the revised scheme. This remains a devolved matter and the Government are taking forward this legislation at the request of the Department for the Economy. It is crucial that that happens because without this legislation, there will be no legislative basis to deliver a sustainable budget for 2019-20. The measures in the Bill, represent an important contribution and properly deliver those.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for allowing me to intervene. I have received a large number of emails mostly, if not exclusively, from individuals who are not constituents of mine but who feel extremely aggrieved by the proposals in this legislation. They entered into the RHI scheme in good faith and feel that they are now being unfairly penalised. I would like the Secretary of State to address that issue this afternoon. Will she assure those people who have raised concerns and who feel very strongly aggrieved by the Bill that there is fairness in the proposals, and that they will not find themselves making their way to the local court to challenge the legislation, because it is in breach of human rights, for example?

Karen Bradley: I will come on to the details of why the decisions have been taken, the advice that we have received from the Department for the Economy and the request that it put in. However, I assure the hon. Lady that the measures we are taking today are the only legal ways in which any subsidies can continue to be paid to anybody on the RHI scheme. Failure to do this will mean the closure of the scheme and no subsidies at all. We need to bear that in mind when looking at this matter. I well understand that people feel concerned when they have entered into an obligation in good faith and then the subsidies that they receive are reduced. I will come on to explain why that is the situation.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): The Secretary of State will be aware of our concern that there has been a lack of proper scrutiny of these proposals. While we await the report of the public inquiry in Northern Ireland, it may be that one of the issues on which it makes recommendations is how we scrutinise this kind of measure going forward. We would have hoped that Parliament could set an example for that, yet we are not getting that opportunity, so would she care to address that concern and the timing of this proposal, coming so close to the end of the financial year?

Karen Bradley: As I said, this situation has resulted from a decision by the European Commission on state aid rules, and failure to do this will mean no subsidies being paid to anybody. I fully accept the right hon. Gentleman’s point about scrutiny, but it comes back to the point we discussed at length yesterday: in the absence of an Executive, there is simply no way scrutiny can take place appropriately.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): While we await the findings of the inquiry, would the Secretary of State agree that whoever’s fault the RHI debacle is—policy makers or politicians—it is certainly not the fault of the people who entered the scheme, and that, at a time when farmers in Northern Ireland are facing great uncertainty and huge challenges, this will be seen as hugely detrimental to them?

Karen Bradley: As I say, I have enormous sympathy for people in this situation. I have met the Ulster Farmers Union and my officials have met individual farmers to talk about it. I well understand the concerns but, faced with a choice between no subsidies at all and cost cutting at 12%, I think this is the right and only legal approach we can take.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for at least acknowledging how grossly unfair this is to many people, but she must recognise that the Bill the Northern Ireland Office has put before the House today does far more than she has indicated. Less than half a page of the Bill deals with the regional rate. The rest—five pages—deals with the RHI scheme, and her proposal for the scheme will bring all renewable activity to an end for a generation. No one will ever again apply for a renewable scheme or a Government-backed deal in Northern Ireland. That will be the effect of her proposal.

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. I will come on to the detail of the renewable heat measures and the work undertaken.

The Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland undertook an extensive public consultation in the last year to ensure that revised measures could be introduced in time for new legislation to come into effect from 1 April 2019. The tariff levels set out in the Bill are based on an analysis of the additional costs and savings of operating a biomass boiler in Northern Ireland. The Department has also engaged with the European Commission in developing the long-term tariff. The Commission has indicated that it is not in a position to approve a tariff that delivers a rate of return higher than 12%. Recognising that a small number of participants with lower usage needs or higher capital costs could see returns below the intended 12%, the Bill makes provision for the introduction of voluntary buy-out arrangements. I recognise that some scheme participants in Northern Ireland will be concerned about these new tariffs. Both the Department for the Economy and my own Department have heard their views in person and in writing in recent weeks, as I said earlier, and I empathise with those people and businesses across Northern Ireland.

Ian Paisley: I thank the Secretary of State for going into the detail. She mentions the 12% rate of return. Why can the rest of the UK set a rate of return on the same scheme fluctuating between 8% and 22%? Why are
our officials being told that Europe will only accept 12% for Northern Ireland, but will accept a differential rate for the rest of the UK? Officials have a duty to tell the public why that is.

Karen Bradley: We cannot easily compare schemes: there are different set-up costs and fuel costs in different parts of the United Kingdom. Differences apply. The work done by the Department for the Economy with the Commission is thorough and has ensured that the recommendations it put to me and the tariffs we are legislating for today mean that the scheme remains legal. That is the important point. If we do not have a legal scheme, there will be no subsidies.

Ian Paisley: The Secretary of State says there are different set-up costs, but under state aid rules that is not allowed. State aid rules declare that the set-up costs are X for the provision of the boiler. In England, different set-up costs are being used, and our Department in Northern Ireland is changing those set-up costs according to its interpretation of what the law demands. Does that not ultimately reflect the need for more scrutiny? To rush the measure through the House is not right, fair or equitable.

Karen Bradley: There are differences in fuel costs and transport costs. There are differences between different parts of the UK. I am interested in making sure that the scheme in Northern Ireland remains legal so that people with boilers can continue to receive some subsidy. I know it is not at the levels they were receiving previously, but it is still some subsidy.

Maria Caulfield: I understand why there has to be a change, but for farmers who have borrowed £250,000 or £500,000 to install a boiler and went to the banks with a guarantee of 20 years of subsidy, a change from £13,000 to £500,000 to install a boiler and went to the banks with a guarantee of 20 years of subsidy will not be a buy-out will be available to boiler owners who do not believe that the subsidies now available will enable them to continue in business.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP) rose—

Gavin Robinson rose—

Karen Bradley: I was about to conclude, but I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, because he is irresistible.

Gavin Robinson: I am very grateful to the Secretary of State. She says that I am irresistible; how could I disagree? She is very kind to give way for a final time.

I want to focus on the fact that the Secretary of State said there was a fixed rate of return of 12%. Participants can hear today that they will not receive that money in the forthcoming years under the terms of the Bill. Is it not the case that the Department for the Economy is saying that they have already received it?

Karen Bradley: As I have said, these are the measures that we need to take now to ensure that the scheme remains on a legal footing. These are the steps that need to be taken to ensure that any subsidies can continue to be paid from the scheme and allow it to remain within the state aid rules. However, I am sure we will debate this issue further at a later stage, and I do understand the hon. Gentleman’s points.

The Bill does two things, both of which are required for good governance and stable public finances in Northern Ireland. I hope that colleagues on both sides of the House agree that it is important for us to make progress now to protect the best interests of all people in Northern Ireland, and to that end I commend the Bill to the House.

3.38 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Bill is in many ways an abuse of the processes of the House. I hope that the Minister will take this seriously. There is no connection between the regional rates and the structure
surrounding the renewable heat incentive scheme, and they should have been presented in two separate pieces of legislation. It is already obvious from the debate so far that there is massive concern about the RHI proposals on both sides of the House, and the level of scrutiny that we will be able to achieve this afternoon simply is not up to the importance of the Bill.

This is not a trivial matter. It is not trivial because in the end the concern expressed by the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) and others that there will be casualties of this process is real. My hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) makes the point that many farms in Northern Ireland—small farms, quite often—are in a parlous state. It matters enormously if we get this legislation wrong.

I hope the Secretary of State will consider that, and I hope that we will not see again an attempt to bludgeon legislation like this through the House in such a short space of time. This should have been taken in Committee; there should have been the opportunity in Committee for a much more leisurely but much more intense form of exchange between the Secretary of State, the Minister and interested Members. That is the right and proper way of doing something of this import.

On regional rates, I want to pick up the point raised about business rates. It is difficult to argue against business rates being uprated by inflation—I think even the greatest quibblers would resist that—but it is important to register that across the different towns of Northern Ireland in particular, there are businesses that are struggling. I do not pick as in a vendetta on the town of Ballymena. It is a town that does need uplift; it needs its businesses supported and an injection of resource.

Ian Paisley: I appreciate the shadow Secretary of State making those kind and glowing references to Ballymena. It has a significant part of the industrial base of Northern Ireland, but that has of course been damaged by the loss of jobs and EU regulations, and to some extent just because of world economic factors. But the fact of the matter is that there is a spirit of change and a spirit of trying to get new jobs back, and I am delighted that today about 60 new jobs will ultimately be financed at USEL—Ulster Supported Employment Ltd—in Ballymena, which is a wonderful scheme that brings disadvantaged young people on and into the workplace and encourages the development of a circular economy.

Tony Lloyd: Like the hon. Gentleman, I very much welcome this piece of good news, but it has to be set against the fact that we do need to see renewal in many towns, and I want to return to a question I raised with Ministers yesterday about the stronger towns moneys. I did not get a response to the question I raised; there was no certainty on that. The Communities Secretary made it clear that the stronger towns moneys were available of course for England but also for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. In Wales and Scotland, I assume those moneys will be diverted through the devolved Administrations there, but with Northern Ireland, we do need some certainty that there is political process and there will be political decision making that can ensure that, whether in Ballymena or any other town, there will be access to the stronger towns moneys. That is important in the context of the debate we are having; yes, we welcome the relative capping of the business rates but we want a recognition that there is still need for legitimate support for businesses across Northern Ireland.

I want to pick up the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore). He made some interesting comments about the impact of the domestic rate increase. An increase of 3% plus inflation is perhaps supportable for many people, but it is interesting to compare with the Government’s proposed uprating for benefits: for universal credit, for example, that will be 2.4% in total. So 3% plus inflation is a bigger cost being imposed on the many families in Northern Ireland who struggle—for instance, low-income families or families on minimum wage. That kind of impact must be considered.

The Secretary of State says that the people of Northern Ireland should make a contribution as well as the Treasury, but let me make the obvious point that the people of Northern Ireland do make a contribution to Treasury moneys: they pay income tax, they pay VAT and they pay all the other taxes that are paid by people throughout the United Kingdom.

In those terms, this is effectively a redistribution from UK-wide taxation—which is perhaps not as progressive as I would like, but at least it has some sense of progression—to a more regressive form of taxation around regional rates. Nevertheless, the many sectors such as local authorities and, most importantly, education spend and health spend that depend on regional rates certainly need to see these resources coming in, so it would be hard to resist the case for this legislation being needed. It also has time import, in that the new financial year will not be long delayed.

However, that is not the case with the legislation relating to the renewable heat incentive. The consultation on the present scheme began last May and finished last September, and this legislation should have been brought before the House long before now if the intention was to implement it on the third parties on 1 April. It is unacceptable that we are now having to legislate at breakneck speed, just as we did yesterday. The legislation is being forced through the House without the opportunity for proper scrutiny. I have to say to the Secretary of State, although not unkindly, that I did not find her answers convincing when she responded to questions raised by previous speakers. I did not honestly feel that the House knew whether the legislation was necessary. I shall go into further detail on that in a moment.

Will the Secretary of State tell me when the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland began to talk to the Northern Ireland Office about the need for an uprating? We know that there was an uprating last year, roughly 12 months ago, and it should have been obvious to everybody, particularly as this had gone out to consultation, that there would be a need for legislation, so why are we doing this so late on? Alternatively, why has it been necessary to do all this today? Could we not have had a Second Reading today, after which the Bill could have gone into Committee in the normal way and completed its progress later on, having had proper scrutiny throughout the process? This matters, for all
the reasons that have already been given in exchanges with the Secretary of State. We have to be certain that the scrutiny is sufficient to reveal exactly what is happening.

On the specific details, I want to ask the Secretary of State some questions that are parallel to those already raised by hon. Members. An argument that is used to underline her case is that only by moving in this direction can we ensure state aid compliance and that this is the only legal basis, other than the complete abolition of the scheme, for reform of the RHI system. I do not know whether that is true. Nothing that has been presented to the House gives us any reason to believe that this is exactly what the European Union has said.

The hon. Member for North Antrim asked why the situation in Great Britain should be different from the situation in Northern Ireland. Why does one involve state aid compliance but not the other? Conversely, one of the proposals in the Ricardo review was to look at the introduction of the GB tariffs in Northern Ireland, and if those tariffs are legitimate for my constituents in Rochdale, why are they not legitimate for people in Northern Ireland?

Maria Caulfield: The shadow Secretary of State is making some good points. The financial difference is stark, because the amount in the rest of the UK will be £20,000 per year per boiler, whereas the amount that we will be moving to in Northern Ireland will be just £2,000 per year per boiler. That is not a small difference.

Tony Lloyd: The hon. Lady makes a valid point. Obviously, it is not a small difference; in fact, it is a huge difference to those on what could be described as the lowest thresholds such as to produce a very different cost pressure. Does she agree?

Maria Caulfield: I agree with what the hon. Gentleman has said, but I am not a lawyer, so I cannot challenge Ministers on some of the things that they have told us. For example, the Secretary of State said that the cost of fuel might be different in Great Britain from Northern Ireland. I am told, however, that a lot of our non-home-grown fuel is imported from the Baltic states, where there is an awful lot of wood—I can assure the House of that, because I have seen it. Those pellets are shipped from the Baltic states to the UK generally, and I can recognise no enormous difference in the cost thresholds such as to produce a very different cost profile in Northern Ireland—a much cheaper one—from that in Great Britain. That would have such different cost pressures does not seem logical. We need proper answers to such questions, although I fear that we will not get them today.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman is saying. The purported purpose of this legislation is to give certainty. I have rarely seen the Government produce legislation that is so obviously ripe for legal challenge on the basis of legitimate expectation. In such circumstances, at the end of the day, surely we will not even give the people concerned, the recipients of the subsidies, the certainty that the Government claim they want.

Tony Lloyd: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and to the extent that some of those affected were in court this morning. Specifically, I understand that the judge said that he will not rule on the request for judicial review today because the scheme has not yet been implemented and is therefore not yet in breach. However, he will ensure that any judicial review is expedited once the scheme is in operation. I was going to make this point later, but I will simply do so now, and ask the Secretary of State and the Minister of State need to address it. What will the Government’s position be if they face judicial review and a challenge that the measure is outwith the competence of our legal framework? There is real risk of that, given that people have signed up to things in expectation of a certain income flow over the years and decades to come, as hon. Members have said. Such issues are not trivial.

Ian Paisley: The shadow Secretary of State is absolutely right. Apparently, this morning, at the High Court in Belfast, a judicial review was not launched and the date for the hearing will be the first week of April. We therefore have to wait until a few days after the change to the new financial year to have an answer. Surely it would be far better to postpone a decision until we have an answer, keeping the current rate until then.

Tony Lloyd: That seems logical, but—I am not a lawyer, so I cannot challenge Ministers on some of the things that they have told us. The Secretary of State said that the cost of fuel might be different in Great Britain from Northern Ireland. I am told, however, that a lot of our non-home-grown fuel is imported from the Baltic states, where there is an awful lot of wood—I can assure the House of that, because I have seen it. Those pellets are shipped from the Baltic states to the UK generally, and I can recognise no enormous difference in the cost thresholds such as to produce a very different cost profile in Northern Ireland—a much cheaper one—from that in Great Britain. That would have such different cost pressures does not seem logical. We need proper answers to such questions, although I fear that we will not get them today.

Maria Caulfield: The shadow Secretary of State is absolutely right. The purported purpose of this legislation is to give certainty. I have rarely seen the Government produce legislation that is so obviously ripe for legal challenge on the basis of legitimate expectation. In such circumstances, at the end of the day, surely we will not even give the people concerned, the recipients of the subsidies, the certainty that the Government claim they want.
Those are material costs that he will continue to have to pay unless the buy-out scheme covers him on the impact of the change to the scheme.

Ian Paisley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his generosity in giving way. Is it not a fact that the weight of what he says is that the scheme now operating here on the British mainland must therefore be flawed? It has to be in breach of the state aid rules, or else the Northern Ireland Office’s proposals are wrong. They cannot both be right, and that matter must be challenged and identified.

Tony Lloyd: I am not being generous with my time because we have to tease out these important issues, and we have to get answers to give us some certainty that the scheme is both necessary and sufficient to protect the interests of those who have acted in good faith.

Lady Hermon: It is crucial that we tease out the details before we give our approval—if we give our approval to this Bill. In the wind-up, I would particularly like the Minister to give further detail on what the Secretary of State said about how the Department for the Economy will seek support for affected participants: those who invested in the renewable heat incentive scheme in good faith. She failed to give any details at all about the efforts of the Department for the Economy to get some support for those who will be adversely affected if we approve this Bill. They had a legitimate expectation of the tariffs that would be paid to them for 20 years, so I would like details from the Minister.

Tony Lloyd: That is a fair point. There is nothing in this Bill that talks about post-legislative scrutiny. We need some capacity to measure the impact of the legislation after it leaves this House, because it will have an impact. The scheme was a disaster from its inception. That is most certainly true. It is also most certainly true that controlling the overall level of cost is and ought to be a matter of public policy, which is in the interests of people in Great Britain as well as in Northern Ireland. Coming up with legitimate control is not something that divides the House, but we need to make sure that we measure the impact on those affected, and that is simply not there.

Maria Caulfield: The clause 4 powers to instigate the buy-out arrangements are to be exercised only in the period while there is no Executive. So this place would have a duty to scrutinise that, because under this legislation once the Executive are back up and running, the job of scrutiny would return to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Tony Lloyd: That has to be right. We have a duty to ensure not only that we dispatch the legislation where it is appropriate to do so, but that we monitor its impact to make sure that no injustice is caused by the clumsiness of the legislation.

I will draw my remarks to a conclusion, but the point I have sought to establish all the way through is that the Secretary of State has not given answers with the level of detail that this House ought to demand if we are to say that this scheme is legitimate in terms of protecting the wider public interest, as it rightly and properly should do, and does no injustice to people who, in reasonably good faith—some may have seen a large amount of pound coins rolling in their direction—invested in a scheme that we as a society wanted to promote: a more environmentally sound system of heating. We need to insist that we get that balance right, but I am not convinced that I can see that in the Bill, the explanatory notes or the Secretary of State’s opening remarks.

I repeat what I said at the beginning: the way the House is being asked to dispatch this legislation today is incompetent and unreasonable. I hope the Secretary of State will reflect on that, because even at this stage it would be possible for the Government to take part of the legislation back and say that the capacity to scrutinise could be done very differently.

Finally, I wish to make a slightly wider point. Once again, the House is being asked to do something that the Secretary of State talked about as being limited but necessary. There are many limited but necessary schemes that she is refusing to do. In response to the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), she made the point that she would be looking to legislate on providing the necessary support for housing associations in Northern Ireland. We would not want to oppose that, as it is necessary to have those housing associations working. Again, however, we come down to questions such as: who will make the decision on the medical school in the Derry and Strabane city deal; when will we see progress on Hart if we are still stalled on getting a devolved Assembly in Stormont; and what are we going to do about the important question of public sector workers, such as nurses, physiotherapists and others in the health service, who will not see the uprating in their pay that their counterparts will see in the rest of the UK? Such issues are within the Secretary of State’s capacity to address. It is difficult for us to see any longer when she will act. Yes, protecting public money and allowing public moneys to be spent by local authorities at the Northern Ireland level is important, but so are these issues. There is no clarity any more—

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that, as far as we are aware, senior civil servants do have the power to give pay increases? In fact, many of them have done so, particularly for nurses, the police and those in the Prison Service—this has been recently announced. The senior civil service does have that ability because of legislation passed in this House previously. Does he agree that we also need to encourage those permanent secretaries to make those decisions earlier, because many of them have taken considerable time, and many people are waiting and are out of pocket? The power is there and we just need to get those decisions made by the senior civil service in a timely way.

Tony Lloyd: A guarantee that everybody in the health service receives the same uprate as their opposite numbers in the rest of Great Britain would be welcome. I think the hon. Lady knows, probably better than me, that the most senior civil servants are still traumatised by the judicial review that found that their level of competence to make decisions was limited. Although we brought legislation through the House, I think few people believe that that really did much more than to codify what was already there, rather than to expand their capacity to make decisions. I would love to believe there was a transparent and accountable decision-making process, and hence coming back to Stormont in operation, but we do not have that at the moment, so the only system of accountability for pressing matters lies ultimately in the House of Commons and the Department.
Emma Little Pengelly: Whenever that legislation was discussed by the House, it was very much part of the context that it should give clarity. I accept the hon. Gentleman’s point that because of the judicial review there was clearly apprehension among the permanent secretaries in some of the Departments about making decisions. The legislation was designed to give that certainty and that legal basis, but we are still seeing a reluctance in some Departments. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that guidance for all the Departments in Northern Ireland would perhaps be helpful, to tell all the civil servants exactly what types of decisions they could and should be making in accordance with the legislation passed by this House?

Tony Lloyd: It may be helpful to deliver that kind of guidance. The problem we all have to face is that, in the end, decisions made by senior civil servants without reference to a policy framework determined here, or in some logical sense determined when the Stormont Executive were operating, will be challengeable. Judicial review can and will take place, and if civil servants face such a review, that will make them cautious about making the wrong decision. Every Member of this House would face the same kind of reluctance. I am sure that some will by instinct be a little braver than others, but something still circumscribes such decisions. I do not actually think that the legislation we passed materially changed that politically the renewable heat incentive

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): These are unusual times for Northern Ireland and this is an unusual Bill. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that what we have today is something of an essay crisis; that is to say, something presented as being urgent and in need of consideration by the House in one day that could in fact easily have been considered more electively.

It has been said that we should decouple these two elements of the Bill. In truth, most of the Bill relates to the renewable heat incentive. The regional rate issue is largely unobjectionable and would pass with the greatest of ease through the House on a bipartisan basis, but we have to accept that politically the renewable heat incentive is an extremely toxic issue. After all, it has brought us to the edge of collapse of the Executive and the Assembly. It is absolutely central to the political chaos that currently afflicts Northern Ireland and that is adversely impacting on the lived experience of people in Northern Ireland, so it demands that we look at the legislation closely and in a considered and measured fashion, of the sort that usually involves a proper Committee stage. That is not being offered on this occasion. I share the surprise expressed by the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) that these two completely different issues have been conjoined in this rather unusual Bill. I have sympathy with his suggestion that the two might be separated so that we can pass that which is unobjectionable and straightforward and consider on a more elective basis those bits—those clauses—that are more complicated.

A 12% return is pretty good by any standards. A casual observer of our proceedings would wonder, I suspect, what the fuss is all about—I would love to have a 12% return on my investments—but the fact of the matter is that those small businesses that invested in this technology did so on the copper-bottomed understanding that they would get a different rate of return. The institutions that lent on that basis would have been similarly advised, and the investment would have been procured on that basis. We now have to unpick something of a disaster on the part of the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland, and I understand the Secretary of State’s dilemma. This is not easy; something has to be done. However, when Bills are before us in this place, we must consider those people who will be inadvertently disadvantaged. Like most hon. and right hon. Members in this House, I have been lobbied by such people who point out that they invested in good faith and that their small businesses might be brought to the edge because of the change in circumstances over which they have no control.

Mr Carmichael: Does that not go to the heart of the matter? The existence of a voluntary buy-out scheme seems an implicit recognition to me that exactly the situation that the hon. Gentleman identifies is one that is likely to occur. That surely means that the legitimate expectations of the recipients of the subsidies are so adversely affected that any legal challenge would be successful.

Dr Murrison: I share the right hon. Gentleman’s concerns in that respect. As a lawyer, he will know better than me that there is every prospect of a judicial review in this matter. It would be very surprising, given the propensity of individuals and organisations in Northern Ireland to seek judicial review on a range of things, if that were not the case in this instance. Indeed, that includes their representative organisations. Clearly, the Government need to do everything in their power to ensure that they are protected against such an eventuality, including, I suggest, ensuring proper scrutiny of this Bill, as inadequate scrutiny will surely be cited as a reason for such a review to result in a judgment that is in favour of those bringing the case forward. However, fear of judicial review is one thing, but what we need to do in this place is to ensure that individuals are not disadvantaged. That means scrutinising this Bill properly and trying to ensure that, if possible, those hard cases are avoided.

I understand the rules on state aid and I understand that the buy-out is a mechanism of trying to be generous to those who may be disadvantaged, but within the rules that have been set. I also have concerns because the Department that has advised on this matter—the
Department for the Economy—is, of course, implicated in the mess in the first place. I would be worried if the Secretary of State were being overly reliant on the advice of the Department and, in all candour, I suggest that she needs to be extremely careful about that.

Scrutiny—challenging advice—is what we do in this place. It worries me that this controversial Bill on this most toxic of issues is not undergoing such scrutiny. It would seem to me to be entirely sensible for Ministers to ensure that this measure has all possible scrutiny to hedge against the possibility that what it is doing, on advice from the Department for the Economy, is in fact erring in some important respect, as indeed the advice to Ministers has been from that Department in the past.

I also worry—this has been touched on already—about what confidence institutions will have in these sorts of Government schemes in the future, given that they will have assumed that anything backed by or instituted by Government is copper-bottomed, safe and triple A rated. They now find that that is not the case, and that any loan they may have made on the basis of an expectation of, admittedly, fantastically high returns—nevertheless, backed by Government—will in fact result in a return much less than that. Indeed, in the event that some of these businesses go to the wall, these investments may have to be written off.

We have to reflect on the fact that many of these businesses are marginal concerns. Many of the 1,800 businesses are farms, and we know that farming in Northern Ireland is quite different from farming in the rest of the United Kingdom. They tend to be small, marginal farms. The people from those farms who have invested in this scheme may find themselves embarrassed financially by this particular decision. It is quite possible that we might be able to design some sort of scheme that is based around hardship for special cases. There is no recommendation to that effect in this Bill other than the buy-out scheme. I commend the Secretary of State for that, as it is absolutely right to bring such a scheme forward within the constraints of state aid, but there is very little beyond that, and there will be cases of hardship.

In the context of Northern Ireland—a small place with lots of small businesses and small farms—would not it be tragic if we found some of those businesses going to the wall as a result of this change in policy?

Of course, this legislation has to go through because if it does not, on 1 April people will be faced with getting nothing, but I gently suggest to Ministers that this is an imperfect Bill that needs further scrutiny and input. I hope very much that my new clause 1 will catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker, and that we may debate this matter further in Committee. It would be extremely good if we could do so, because the new clause makes some sensible recommendations about how we can ensure that this difficult part of a Bill that is otherwise unobjectionable is given the scrutiny that it deserves so that people can therefore have greater confidence in it.

In general, the Secretary of State is quite right to bring this legislation forward. It is a pity that we have not had the scrutiny of the whole Bill that it really deserves. Given the issues that currently apply at Stormont, we need to be particularly careful in this place that we give matters that relate to Northern Ireland all the scrutiny we can possibly can. This represents something of an essay crisis that was absolutely avoidable had we brought the measures forward in a more timely manner and decoupled these two very different elements of a particularly unusual Bill.

4.17 pm

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I rise to speak briefly in this Bill on devolved Northern Ireland business. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) can rest assured that there will be no green cheese in today’s remarks; and these will be remarks, as they will hardly be a speech.

As the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, I said, it has been over two years since the renewable heat incentive brought down the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly, grinding all decision making to a halt. Since that occurred, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the UK Government have simply not done enough to restore Northern Ireland’s political institutions and restore confidence in power-sharing while championing Northern Ireland’s devolution settlement.

We have just passed yet another fast-tracked budget Bill that, by rights, should have been debated and decided on in Belfast. Today we will fast-track yet another Bill—this one on rates and the renewable heating scheme, albeit a scheme with huge and unintended political consequences, but the criteria of which were designed in Northern Ireland, for Northern Ireland.

I reiterate one of the central points that I made yesterday as we debated the Northern Ireland Budget (Anticipation and Adjustments) (No. 2) Bill: these debates should not be ours to have and these decisions should not be ours to make. Decisions on devolved issues must only be taken in devolved legislatures or by Ministers of devolved Executives and Governments—not in this place and certainly not in Whitehall. Of course, Stormont’s politicians need to start serving the people they were elected to represent, but this Government must up their game to get the two sides round the table—and if they cannot, as I said yesterday, they should bring in a third party who can. I accept that this Bill must be passed, but we cannot continue passing such legislation in this place—that is not how devolution should ever work.

I promised to be brief, and brief I will be. I very much hope that this is the last time that I, or anybody else in this place, makes a contribution on a matter like this that is for other devolved legislatures.

4.20 pm

**Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): The reason we are here is that the Assembly has not been sitting for over two years now. There are many members of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee here this afternoon. In our public evidence session this morning, the leader of the Green party in Northern Ireland said that she thought that the Assembly would not be up and running for the rest of this year. It is therefore likely that we will be returning here in the next few months, or maybe even this time next year, with similar Bills looking at the budget, as we did yesterday, and rates. I hope that is not the case.

Many of us are putting pressure on all political parties to get back around the table and get the Assembly up and running because, as we now start to scrutinise devolved issues, we hear week in, week out, about the
impact that that is having. We have heard from headteachers in Northern Ireland about issues of procurement. Even simple, basic supplies are not being procured properly and effectively, and money is being wasted on them. We have heard from the Commissioner for Children and Young People that the Salisbury review of education has meant that some funding reforms that should be taking place to enable money to be better spent in small rural schools are not happening because there is no one to take that decision. It is not just about not getting the money to spend; scrutiny of the decisions on how it is spent is not happening either. Both are equally important. The RHI is a classic example of why we need that scrutiny. The RHI was a significant factor in the fall of the Assembly in the first place. The fact that we are now making decisions on it without any real scrutiny apart from a couple of hours in this Chamber is significantly worrying given the impact that it will have on small businesses in Northern Ireland, particularly in the farming community.

I have sympathy with the Secretary of State, and I agree that we have to make a decision this afternoon, or else any subsidies will stop completely, which would be a huge disservice to the people of Northern Ireland. However, the fact that it has been left to the last minute to make this decision will have a real impact. As a member of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, I have been contacted by Northern Ireland businesses telling me that many of them—some have 10 biomass facilities on their farms—have gone to the banks to borrow £250,000 or £500,000 in the expectation that they would get a guaranteed subsidy over a 20-year period. In any other walk of life, someone who breached that agreement would be in court having to defend that or having to pay compensation.

It is not the fault of anyone here in this Chamber that we are in this position, but neither is it the fault of farmers or businesses who took these decisions. Many will go under if we do not address this issue. To add insult to injury, people in the rest of the United Kingdom will be getting £20,000 per biomass incinerator, whereas farmers, or whoever else has installed them, in Northern Ireland will gain only £2,000. That is a real concern. The Ulster Farmers Union has rightly raised that issue; I know that the Secretary of State has met its representatives but have no representation in elected representatives but have no representation in people in Northern Ireland have gone to the polls and decisions are required. It is frustrating that, once again, it should be the Assembly taking responsibility and it should be the Assembly taking responsibility and it should be the Assembly taking responsibility.

I have a few questions for the Minister to respond to when he sums up. Can the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee have ongoing scrutiny of this issue, so that we can look at how the buy-out system is working and the impact of the reduction in subsidy and take quick action if it is having a devastating impact, as some fears suggest? What happens if the Executive are restored in the meantime? We heard this morning in the Select Committee that that is unlikely to happen soon, but if it did, there would be an impact on clause 4 in particular and how the budget would be set. We cannot set in place a system today that will be overturned in, say, six months. That would be really unfair on those affected.

Can we have clarity on why there is such a difference between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom? A number of Members have raised that, and it would be helpful to understand it. Can we have further scrutiny of how buy-out payments will be achieved? I have grave concerns that it will be based on the cost of biomass installations, but far greater costs, such as interest payments on loans, will have to be taken into consideration.

I share Members’ concerns—we should not be in this position. It is not this Government’s fault that a scheme was set up that was never going to work financially, but we have a responsibility to the people of Northern Ireland to ensure that the solution put in place is fair and does not have a detrimental effect on those who invested in all good faith.

4.26 pm

**Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield). I thank her for her genuine interest in Northern Ireland affairs and for contributing to the debate.

As has been pointed out, this Bill contains two totally unrelated pieces of legislation. The reasons for that have been given, although I am not convinced that this is the best way of dealing with the issues at hand. Let me deal first with rates. I accept what the Secretary of State said; it is important that people in Northern Ireland contribute through their rates to some of the public expenditure required to keep services going in Northern Ireland. But when we impose those additional charges, whether on domestic or business rates, it is important that we bear in mind two things: the ability to pay and the impact that any taxation has on either the businesses or households concerned.

I have reservations about the level of the domestic rate increase, which is above the rate of inflation—it is the rate of inflation plus 3%. That will cause difficulty for households, as some people will not qualify for housing benefit on their rates but are still in low-paid employment and want to stay in employment. That will cause difficulty, but it is nothing compared with what was originally proposed. Let us not forget that the original proposal was 10% plus inflation. I am glad that the Secretary of State did not pursue that. The party of government, like my party, believes in leaving people with as much of their money to spend as possible. People know how to spend their money better than the Government. It would have been a travesty if the Government had proposed an 11.8% increase in the rates that people pay for their home, especially given the Government’s boast time and again—one they ought to be proud of—that they are seeking to bring down the level of taxation. I am pleased that my colleagues and I had a role to play in knocking that figure down.
On the issue of business rates, this is really a 0% increase in real terms. Nevertheless, business rates in Northern Ireland are, for a number of reasons, some of the highest in the United Kingdom. The Chancellor has announced some business rates relief schemes—incidentally, we did have a Barnett consequential for that in Northern Ireland—but because of the non-functioning of the Assembly, it was not possible to revise the small business rate relief scheme in Northern Ireland. While that money was made available to the general purse, it was not translated into reductions for businesses.

In the long term, I think we need to look at the whole issue of business rates. It is of course a tax that is not related in any way to the ability of a business to pay. It does not reflect the buoyancy of the business or, indeed, the income from the business; it simply reflects the size of the premises and the rateable value of the premises that businesses happen to be occupying. For some people, that will lead to under-taxation because they could afford to pay more, but for many businesses it leads to over-taxation because their overheads go up or stay the same even though their income and their ability to pay are going down, which affects so many.

I suppose it is not just an issue for Northern Ireland, but this is one of the reasons why we have so many vacant premises on so many of our high streets. As businesses have come under pressure from online retailing and from the changes in the way consumers spend their money, they find their revenues going down, but the overheads remain the same. In the longer term, I think we need to have a review of business rates. I am pleased that at least there has not been a real-terms increase in rates for businesses, although I know many of them will struggle even with the inflationary increase in this piece of legislation.

Let me turn to the second part of the Bill on the changes to the renewable heat incentive payments. I do not think anyone can say that this scheme has been a success by any means. In fact, it has been a disgrace, and the way in which it was set up and has been abused required there to be a change. However, I must say that when it comes to subsidies for renewable heat, I do not think that some of the practices instigated through this Parliament and in this part of the United Kingdom would stand up to scrutiny any more than the renewable heat incentive stood up to scrutiny in Northern Ireland.

We have a situation at present that makes the subsidy in Northern Ireland disappear into insignificance. At Drax B power station, the subsidy has climbed from £250 million a year when the Liberal Democrat Minister introduced it to £800 million this year, and it is going to go up to £1,000 million a year, when coal could be mined two miles down the road. And what do we do? We bring in wood pellets from America. We chop down trees in America, put them in a boat, bring them to England and burn them in a power station, and we pay a subsidy of £800 million a year for it. I wonder how many houses in the south of England are having their outdoor swimming pools heated with boilers for which people get a renewable heat incentive payment. Is that a good use of public money? The renewable heat incentive has not received the same level of scrutiny in other parts of the United Kingdom as in Northern Ireland, where it was seen to be abused. However, there are big questions to be asked about the scheme, not just in Northern Ireland but in any other part of the United Kingdom.

I have several points to make about the need for review. We have been told that the legislation has to pass today instead of being given the level of scrutiny required. Many hon. Members have asked detailed, probing and important questions, but we are told that if the Bill does not pass today, no subsidy regime at all will be available at the beginning of the next financial year, and that if we continue with the existing subsidies, we will be subject to infraction proceedings from the European Union.

Why was all this brought forward at the last minute? It is not that the review of the scheme has been forced on the Department in the past three or four months; it was initiated by the last Minister for the Economy before the Assembly fell, more than two years ago. What has happened in the meantime? Why has it taken two years, with a rush to pass the legislation at the very end? The joke in Northern Ireland is that evolution works quicker than some of our Departments. However, given that the review was initiated more than two years ago, I have to ask why, at the last minute, we are suddenly being presented with a piece of legislation that raises a lot of questions, instead of being given time to carry out the proper scrutiny, in Committee and so on, that the hon. Member for Lewes and the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee have suggested.

Maria Caulfield: It strikes me, as an MP who is still fairly new in this place, that the attitude is often, “It’s only Northern Ireland, so we can whizz it through in a day.” It should not be right for any Bill to pass Second Reading, Committee and Third Reading in one day without any suitable scrutiny.

Sammy Wilson: The hon. Lady makes her point well, as she did in her speech.

Not everyone abused the scheme. Some did, and it is right that their subsidies were cut, but many people had the scheme sold to them by the then Sinn Féin Minister of Agriculture and by the Minister in the Department for the Economy. It was sold to farmers and many other businesses as a subsidy for heating their premises because they were using the kind of energy that was in vogue with the Department, which wanted to cut down on CO₂. I am not really sure how burning wood cuts down CO₂ emissions—I am told that it puts as much CO₂ into the air as coal, and some of the pellets are imported from miles and miles away—but that was the thinking at the time.

People undertook in good faith to install the boilers. They borrowed money, expecting a certain level of return and a flow of payments. They could have put in gas boilers and got cheaper energy, but because of the hysteria against fossil fuels, it was decided to subsidise wood burning, so people installed a more expensive boiler and expected to get money in return.

We are told that the sudden and very substantial reduction in the subsidy happened because the EU said that it was required to keep us to the average 12% level. There has been some dispute, in discussions with officials, about whether the rate of return can be between 8% and 22% so long as it averages out at 12%, or whether it is a maximum of 12%. If we had had the time or a mechanism to bring forward officials we could have probed into that, but we are told it is 12%.
In England, the subsidy per boiler is about five times higher than the subsidy per boiler in Northern Ireland. The scheme in the Irish Republic pays about six times more per boiler than in Northern Ireland. The question is this: how can you pay a subsidy five times more in England and still be within EU state aid limits? You can pay a subsidy that is six times more in the Republic of Ireland and still be within EU state aid limits. In Northern Ireland, however, it has to be at the level of £2,000 per boiler to stay within the state aid limits.

The explanation given—I cannot question it as I do not have enough information—is that, “Oh, the cost of boilers and the cost of fuel is different in Northern Ireland from the cost in England”. I could believe that if we were talking about, say, a 10% difference, but we are talking about a percentage difference in the hundreds here. Why does a boiler cost substantially more in England than it does in Northern Ireland? You might argue that it is because of transport costs, but then why does it not cost more in the Irish Republic? If a boiler has to come from England or another country, it has to be transported across the sea to the Republic of Ireland. Why should fuel cost substantially more in Northern Ireland than it does across the border in the Irish Republic? There might be some explanations as to why it costs less than in England, but why should there be such a huge difference between the two jurisdictions on the one island?

There could be perfectly good explanations for that, but given that the Department for the Economy got its figures so wrong for the initial scheme, you can understand, Madam Deputy Speaker, why people in Northern Ireland are sceptical about any figures that come out of the Department. The Department did not spot that the subsidy was substantially more than the cost of fuel and got its figures so wrong that there was a massive overspend. Figures for any scheme it brings forward need to be scrutinised properly. There is no opportunity to do that, despite whatever questions we ask Ministers today. A lot of these things come out through discussion, not through a question and a quick answer back from a Minister.

Those are the kinds of issues that need to be addressed. Unfortunately, I think we will have to vote for the Bill tonight, because there really is no alternative and it would be far worse to leave people with no scheme by voting against it. However, the Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee suggested that there ought to be a commitment to allow the Committee, even after the Bill is passed, to have the opportunity to bring officials and anyone else necessary along, so that it can question them on the figures. If those figures are shown to be wrong, the scheme has to be amended to ensure that the level of subsidy paid reflects the true costs of the scheme. That is the one assurance we have to give to those who have been badly bitten.

I welcome the intervention and the fact that there was also some discussion on the budget, albeit late in the day. I think it was only two or three weeks ago that we were first given sight of what was proposed in the budget, but because the decision had to be made internally—purely by the Northern Ireland Office and the Department of Finance—there was time to revise the enormous increase that was being proposed initially for the rates. In the case of the renewables scheme, it had to go back to Europe. Thank goodness that after 29 March, we will not have to worry about state aid rules. We can make our own decisions. That is a good thing and another reason why the House should make sure that we get out on 29 March, so that we can decide on the kind of support that we want to give industry or the lack of support—

Maria Caulfield: May we ask the Minister if—when we leave the EU on 29 March—we could look again at the subsidy issue, given that state aid rules will no longer apply?

Sammy Wilson: I agree with the hon. Lady. One of the reasons why we need scrutiny of the legislation, even after it has gone through, is so that we have a chance to revise it if we see that the figures are wrong. Since people have bought the boilers and had the infrastructure installed, would it be better to find a level of subsidy that enables people to continue to use them rather than just buying them out? The fact that we have a buy-out clause in the Bill shows that the Government and Department know that there will be hardship for people, although I suspect that the terms of the buy-out will be so draconian that it will not be worthwhile people doing that.

We will be supporting the legislation, albeit reluctantly, but on the basis that there will be an opportunity for the good questions that Members across the House have asked today to be looked at in more detail.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before I call the next hon. Gentleman to speak, I have to announce the result of today’s six deferred Divisions on questions relating to regulations on exiting the European Union. In respect of the question relating to financial services and markets, the Ayes were 303 and the Noes were 250, so the Ayes have it. In respect of the question relating to electricity, the Ayes were 302 and the Noes were 44, so the Ayes have it. In respect of the question relating to gas, the Ayes were 300 and the Noes were 44, so the Ayes have it. In respect of the question relating to food, the Ayes were 303 and the Noes were 44, so the Ayes have it. In respect of the question relating to electronic communications, the Ayes were 301 and the Noes were 257, so the Ayes have it. And, in respect of the question relating to road traffic, the Ayes were 301 and the Noes were 251, so the Ayes have it.

We will recommence the Second Reading debate with Mr Vernon Coaker.

[The Division list is published at the end of today’s debates.]
Assembly has not been meeting for over two years, that we in this Parliament, without moving towards any sort of direct rule, are seen by the people of Northern Ireland as being unhinged in their support for the policies of regional rates and more generally, the RHI.

The majority of Members of this United Kingdom Parliament would consider it quite inadequate to be given information that makes bland statements of the sort the Secretary of State made in her introduction. That is why I intervened. She basically announced that the Government were going to increase the regional rate by 3% plus inflation. There is no explanation of how they arrived at that figure. What debate was had? I am not talking about the ability to amend the figure or take on the civil servants in Northern Ireland, but that figure was not plucked out of thin air. There have been discussions. There have been discussions—quite rightly—with representatives here, and now hear that 10.5% or 11.5% was suggested. The vast majority of Members, given the absence of the devolved Assembly, would have been completely unaware of that.

Whatever the rights and wrongs, what is the consequence of reducing the rate to 3%? Somewhere along the line, the Northern Ireland Office, in consultation with representatives in Northern Ireland—business and so on—arrived at 3%. Was there an option to go lower? The right hon. Member for East Antrim rightly made the point that for some families even 3% plus inflation will be a significant cost. No information has been given to Parliament, yet we are set to agree the rate. I am not suggesting we should not agree it, but what reasons were given for a lower increase?

In her written ministerial statement, the Secretary of State said:

“This budget position has been constructed on the basis of a 3% (plus inflation) increase on the domestic regional rate, and 0% plus inflation on business rates. I consider that this is a necessary and important step to continue to support public services”. —[Official Report, 28 February 2019; Vol. 655, c. 24WS.]

In any other public debate, the Secretary of State or Minister would explain how they had arrived at that figure. I am not saying it is wrong; all I am saying is that I have no idea from the information I have gathered—from a few media reports and from what Northern Ireland Members have said—how it was arrived at. Since we are making this decision, in the absence of the devolved Assembly, the Government should be making more information available, while respecting the fact that we are in circumstances none of us wishes to be in.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): The regional rate will make up roughly 46% of the overall domestic rate in household bills from April. Most local authorities have struggled to maintain below-inflation rate increases, and they will be impacted because the public will not understand that a large percentage is a regional add-on to the rates bill. They will not see that the 5.8% is a regional add-on.

Vernon Coaker: That is an interesting point. The hon. Gentleman has shared with the House another important piece of information that will no doubt be reported and on which it is important that Parliament reflects. Nobody is saying this is wrong or that the Government are in a state of confusion, but where is the information that would allow us to consider this in a much more measured and informed way?

I know it is unrelated to the Bill, but we were told time and again in yesterday’s debate, “It’s been agreed we should spend more on education and health and that necessarily means less on other areas”. It is stated, not argued. The House is given no information for why it is. It is just asserted. In the present circumstances, I would suggest to the Minister, the Secretary of State and the Northern Ireland Office that they consider much more carefully how they inform the House of how decisions have been arrived at. That is not to usurp the functions of the civil service in Northern Ireland or to seek to replace the devolved settlement, but if we are being asked to make decisions, we should have much more information.

I have a similar view about the business rate. The business rate increase is 0%, but plus inflation, so it is not 0% as such. Again, the right hon. Member for East Antrim outlined some of the difficulties for business. Notwithstanding the investment that is taking place in Northern Ireland and the success stories there, there are issues surrounding the business rate. Those who google or read the Northern Ireland press will be able to see some of what businesses are saying about what they perceive as the unfairness with which it operates. It is not necessarily for the House to say that it should be changed, because that is not our function, but if it is 0% plus inflation, it is certainly our function to consider it.

Why was it necessary for the right hon. Member for East Antrim, rather than the Secretary of State or the Minister, to outline some of the problems that businesses were identifying in respect of the increase? The Secretary of State, and the Minister, when he responds to the debate, should say something about this, to demonstrate to the people of Northern Ireland that we understand what is going on, and that the decisions that are being made in the present circumstances reflect that. The hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) said something very similar, unless I misinterpreted what she said. As I have observed on numerous occasions to various Secretaries of State, we seem to be rubber-stamping things without proper scrutiny and without being given any proper information.

Let me now make some comments about the RHI scheme. No one would want us to be where we are now, but the seriousness of this is simply astonishing. As has been said by the right hon. Member for East Antrim and others—including, I think, the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison)—the House has not much alternative but to pass the Bill as it stands. According to the explanatory memorandum, 1,800 small and medium-sized businesses—about 100 per constituency, on average—will be affected if it is not passed, because no subsidy arrangements will be available to them. This is a phenomenal problem. No wonder the people in those businesses will be looking at what is happening here and, in many cases, will be in despair. As we all know, small businesses depend considerably on cash flow. Many are already struggling, and people are working hard to make ends meet. Of course some sort of scheme must be in place, but I agree very much with the Chair of the Select Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly—arrived at 3%. Was there an option to go lower?
Committee. It does come to something when, essentially, we are approving this scheme because it is a case of “Oh my God, if we don’t, we will be in trouble.”

Ian Paisley: The hon. Gentleman has put his finger on a number of issues. We have been told that it is the legal opinion of the Department that that is the case, but we are not able to see or challenge that legal opinion. That is why a judicial review has been launched. It could actually be that the legal opinion that the Department is proffering is wrong, and that we could, at the end of the month, revert to the original payment scheme.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We are caught in the headlights. The threat that is being made is that if we do not do this, we will be responsible for ensuring that farmers get zero. That is not right.

Vernon Coaker: I cannot really add to what the hon. Gentleman has said, other than to agree with it. That sums it up. Members of the public will be looking at us—they will not be distinguishing between the Government and the Opposition—and wondering how on earth we have let it come to this. All I can say to the Minister is that, notwithstanding the fact that it looks as if we will have to pass the Bill otherwise people simply will not know what the position will be after 1 April. I think there is a great deal of merit in what the Chair of the Committee said. I think that the Minister—I hope he is listening to what I am saying—needs to take account of what has been said by every single Member on both sides of the House. They are saying even if it is necessary to pass this legislation for the reasons that we have heard—to give that certainty—notwithstanding the fact that there is a legal challenge and notwithstanding the fact that we seem to be doing this because we have no choice and we are caught in the headlights, the Government must realise the strength of opinion about this. They must take up at the very least the very reasonable suggestion by the Chair of the Select Committee and check—particularly if there is a legal challenge, in which case they will have to—whether the statistics are right and whether the Committee can look at this. If it is found that there is an alternative to what is happening at present the Government can perhaps review the legislation.

I know what will happen in the civil service, with all due respect; it will say it is not possible. My experience of Government is that if there is a will everything is possible, and it is perfectly possible for the Secretary of State and the Minister of State—two of the most senior members of the UK Government—to take responsibility and say they are not prepared for 1,800 businesses to be treated unfairly, because by and large those people are totally innocent. In totally good faith, they took on the RHI, and they should not pay the price of a public policy failure. If that means that as a result in a couple of weeks, a month or six weeks, the Government have to review what has happened, I think that will be a price worth paying, because that will be fairness. People expect the Government to operate in a way that is fair to all.

I hope that the Minister heard what I said about information that should be made available to this Parliament on how things like a regional rate are decided, not in order to disagree, but to have greater information to understand how a decision has been arrived at. On the RHI, can the Minister reassure the House whether something can be done in a few weeks should it prove possible to do that and should it prove to be the case that the statistics were wrong?

I hope—as I know the Minister, the Secretary of State and every Member of this House does—that in the longer term, whatever that means, we can see a restoration of devolved government. I gently say to all of them that what might need to happen is, rather than just wishing it, we should try to see whether there is something new we can say or do that will hasten the restoration of devolved government in Northern Ireland.

5.2 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): It is good to follow the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker). When he said, “Where there’s a will there’s a way,” I thought he was going to get into the Brexit debate, like my right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), and say, “If there’s a will, there’s a way,” and we hope that in the next few weeks we find that will from our negotiating partners and then find a way out, truly, of the EU. But I digress by straying on to the Brexit debate.

The debate on the Bill has largely been masked by the debate around RHI, and it would be remiss of me not to pass some comment on clause 1 and what has been achieved. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) have been heavily engaged for the last number of weeks on that point. As has already been alluded to, we would have been facing a massive rates hike if it had not been for that negotiation. If only it had been the same for the second part of the Bill: that we had had early sight of it and could discuss and challenge and probe it and therefore see a much more beneficial change than the one that has come forward to date on RHI. We must, however, congratulate our colleagues on their hard work in trying to significantly improve the rates issue.

The shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd), made some very kind remarks about the situation in Ballymena. I believe that there is an agreement today to see new opportunities created there by USEL, an employer that has set up a site on the Woodside Road industrial estate, and that is leading directly to the employment of 60 new workers in the constituency. Unfortunately, I was unable to attend the opening of that site because of duties here in Parliament, but I know that the Gallaher charitable trust, which I chair, led with key financial support to that building and that employer and that that has directly resulted in the employment of those people. Where did that charitable trust money come from? It is a legacy fund left over from when JTI Gallaher had to close its doors, and I am delighted that the first thing we have been able to do, through paying out money and resources, is to help to create 60 new jobs in the constituency. I hope that in the next few years we will see not only the charity that I chair but other employers adding to the local economy and creating new jobs and skills, leading to a revival in local employment.
I hope that the measures on the city deals will shortly come before the House, as they could apply very beneficially to the Mid and East Antrim Borough Council area, as could the Heathrow hub scheme. All those projects could see a huge increase in the employment and opportunities coming to my constituency, and I am delighted with the work that will be done in that regard. I want to ask the Secretary of State and her Minister to challenge Translink to hurry up and create more orders for the local bus building company in my constituency. It is great to see it getting orders from places all over the world, including Latin America and Hong Kong, but I would love to see more orders coming through to it from Translink, and I encourage the Secretary of State to push for those orders to come forward.

We now have to turn to the perplexing issue of the renewable heat incentive. The shadow Secretary of State was absolutely right to say that we are being presented with an amalgamation of two Bills. That is wrong; there should be a stand-alone piece of legislation on the RHI, because it is so controversial and far-reaching, and because the consequences of the issue will be felt by a lot of people in Northern Ireland for a very long time—indeed, probably for the next 20 years. Instead, these measures have just been stapled on to the back of this Bill, and we are now being expected to nod it through without serious, appropriate scrutiny. I do not believe in nodding through legislation; nor do I believe in the emergency process by which we are taking through this legislation. Northern Ireland deserves better, and this House has to demonstrate to Northern Ireland that we are going to give it better.

Officials in Northern Ireland have handed us these proposals, and I believe that they think we should accept them without challenge or scrutiny. That would be wrong, because it would be unfair on the people we represent. I think that people will understand and accept our caution, given that these are the very same officials who brought forward the first flawed scheme. We are now expected to accept the evidence they are giving us today as being good, beneficial, tested and rigorous and to accept that it will be all right on the night. That is not the case, however, because there are flaws in what is being put to us, and even in the manner in which it is being put to us, and they should be properly challenged.

Those in the Department are privately telling us that they would welcome the opportunity for further scrutiny. They do not want the debacle of the past to happen again; they want to learn from the mistakes of the past, rather than to repeat them. I believe that any such extra scrutiny would be very beneficial. A new clause has been tabled to the Bill—it stands in the name of the Chairman of the Northern Ireland Committee, the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), and several other Members from across the House—and I hope that the you, Madam Deputy Speaker will be kind enough to select it and allow us to debate that issue properly.

Two wrongs never make a right. The obvious historical problems with the RHI tariff are the subject of an ongoing inquiry, and it would not be right to press those matters here today. However, the future ought never to be held to ransom by the past. Unfortunately, the Bill that the Secretary of State has brought to us today will hold the future of the RHI to ransom because of what has happened in the past, and that is wrong. We need to treat people fairly and honestly going forward. No matter what the RHI inquiry throws up, which will have to be dealt with on its own terms, we have a duty and a responsibility to treat the RHI owners in a way that is respectful, honest and fair, and equitable with the rest of the United Kingdom.

Everyone can look at the measures and the proposed cuts in support—from as much as £13,000 to about £2,000 per annum—and then at those same people who have bank loans signed up to on the basis of the original business plans and legal arguments. The banks, however, will not go back on the original plans. They will not say, “We’ll just forgive all that debt; it’s all over.” Banks do not operate like that, and why should they? They were given business plans guaranteed by the Government—legal guarantees—and they expect people to honour the payments agreed.

The Government have to accept that the way in which the issue has been brought forward tonight is not fair to 2,020 boiler owners in Northern Ireland. The vast majority of them, as the hon. Member for Gedling said, have done nothing wrong; they followed the rules, totally and absolutely, yet tonight they are being held to ransom by the system. Most of those RHI users are not abusers of the system, but they will all be punished by the system that is to be introduced now. Again, that is grossly unfair.

People can look across the channel to see the English system, or south to see the RHI system that has been proposed but not yet introduced in the Republic of Ireland, where support will be significantly higher than even here on the British mainland. The Bill will not only punish but in effect end for the next 20 years all renewable energy plans and damage forever anyone who claims a copper-bottomed guarantee from the Government, no matter the shade of that Government, because they will look back at this scheme and say, “Look how we were done over, treated shabbily and given no answers to our questions. This will lead us to a situation in which we are treated badly.”

Today, I tabled questions about levels of support and Barnett consequentials for RHI payments in both Scotland and Wales. The proposals in the Republic of Ireland will be so much more generous even than what will be made available here in England, as well as in Scotland and Wales. The only part of the United Kingdom that will therefore be treated unfairly is Northern Ireland. The cuts are to the bone, and through it.

The argument presented by the Department yesterday in a 15-minute presentation was that this would stop a breach of state aid rules. That simply is not good enough. We have to be given more substance and the legal arguments to demonstrate the precise nature of those state aid requirements, which do not appear to apply to another European Union member state—namely, the Republic of Ireland—or to the rest of the United Kingdom or any of its regions, whether Scotland, Wales or England. State aid rules are supposed to apply in the same way, yet Northern Ireland has been singled out to be treated differently.

The Department has a duty to make the case in public. It and the Secretary of State cannot give a 15-minute briefing to the shadow Secretary of State or us as Members of Parliament in a conference, and then expect us to sell it to the public. Do they think we are mad? That is not acceptable. The Department has a duty to stand up in public and to defend itself. Will the
Secretary of State make herself and officials available to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee for us to ask them the difficult questions? Let us at least have the opportunity to put those questions to the Secretary of State, because so far today we have had no answers to any questions.

For example, how did the Department come to the figure for the average cost of boilers in Northern Ireland? What was the basis on which that was done? The Department has given us a figure for the average cost, and are we just to accept it? We are not equipped to challenge that figure unless we see the evidence, but we are not allowed to see that evidence. We are just told that we have to accept it. We have the great sword of Damocles hanging over us—"If you don’t accept it by the end of the month, farmers will not be paid.” Blackmail is all that is, and it is wrong.

What is excluded from the cost assumptions in Northern Ireland? Are those same exclusions made to the cost assumptions here in England? We did not get any of that answer. We asked three or four times during the 15-minute presentation, and there were raised eyebrows, but and buts, and, “Ask someone down the video line. He might be able to tell you.” We were not able to confirm whether the £2,500 plumbing costs or the £1,000 electrical costs are included in the English scheme but excluded from the Northern Ireland scheme. If so, why? If they are, I am not the one to sell it to the general public in Northern Ireland on the basis of a 15-minute presentation; it is up to the Department to sell it.

When a person applies for one of these boilers, they have to seek planning permission, which is a costly exercise. They have to pay a lawyer and, usually, an architect. Is all that included in the English scheme but excluded from the Northern Ireland scheme? Apparently, it is included in the English scheme but excluded from the Northern Ireland scheme. If it is excluded from one on the basis that it is against state aid rules, I can tell the House there is an express train coming down the tracks towards those who try to include it in the English scheme. We have to address those issues.

Do the cost assumptions differ from what is permitted in England? If so, why do they differ? The Department and, indeed, the Secretary of State need to answer that question. If 12% is the rate of return, why can the rest of the UK work on a rate of return of between 8% and 23%, as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim said? Why is there that differential? We were given an excuse yesterday. We were told 16 times that the European official had told the Department for the Economy that it could not move from 12%. Why can it not move from 12%? It is up to the Department to reveal the answer, if it has one. Why should I go out and sell it to my constituents when the Department told me that Europe has said it cannot do it? That might have been all right for the past 40 years, but from 29 March it will not be acceptable. Europe cannot tell us all those things, and it is therefore wrong, 23 days before we leave, that the EU is allowed to hold us to ransom on that point.

When we ask whether the state aid rules will still apply after 29 March, some lawyers say they will and others say they will not. Why should I make the case in public? It is up to departmental officials and the Secretary of State to make the case, and they have to answer those questions. Officials say that the EU does not allow them to stray from 12%. Why is that the case? A judicial review was lodged this morning, and the appeal will be heard in April. Is it really appropriate for us to change the tariff about 30 days before that judicial review hearing? I do not believe it is. I think that in itself could constitute knowledge that we were doing something wrong, and I think the Department needs to move.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) made the point well that the buy-out scheme is an admission that this scheme is flawed. If that is the case, the Government will pay out even more compensation if it goes to judicial review. Will the state aid rules apply after 29 March?

If we were successful in voting against the Bill tonight, would the payments stop on 1 April? The Secretary of State made that case. When we asked yesterday for evidence to back it up, we were told that it is just a legal opinion, but that legal opinion is being tested in the courts today because there is another equally valid legal opinion saying that it is a wrongful interpretation. We will know the outcome in the first or second week of April.

All those questions need to be answered in advance of our taking a decision. We are not being given the proper time to scrutinise this properly. It is little wonder that we have been inundated by calls, emails and personal visits from hundreds of constituents, businesses and farm families who are affected because this touches more than 2,000 owners in Northern Ireland. If those businesses go out of existence, that would be the equivalent of 60,000 or more small businesses closing here on the British mainland. That perhaps gives a sense of the proportion of what has been affected; we are talking about tens of thousands of families who would be affected if this was transferred over here. We have to address that matter properly. The Department has a duty to make that case in public. It is not our duty to make the case for it, because it is sitting on the evidence. I would therefore welcome the opportunity to scrutinise it properly; the Secretary of State and officials should come before the Select Committee. They should make themselves available instead of expecting us to nod this matter through.

I agree that if Stormont was in place tonight, this debate would be better placed there—that is where it should be taking place—but we have to deal with the cards as they are currently, and Stormont is not in place. It would therefore be a dereliction of our duty to do this in what we would describe locally as a “half-baked way”. Frankly, what we are doing here tonight is half-baked; this is not proper scrutiny, with Parliament at its best, but Parliament doing something and taking shortcuts. That will result in problems down the line. I fear that in a matter of months something will come out and people will say, “You really should not have taken that decision on 6 March 2019. It was a huge mistake.”

We are therefore right to be cautious about supporting this part of the Government’s proposal tonight. This House has a duty to carry out scrutiny, in the absence of the Assembly, and to do it properly. The Department, whenever we met its representatives, outlined how it came to its calculations, but the only conclusions I can draw is that if the Department for the Economy is right in what it has told us, the scheme currently operating here in England is unlawful. If that is the case, an even bigger question is raised. I have asked that very question
of officials and looked at their answer. If officials know that that system was unlawful, they are on notice today that they had knowledge of it and, in effect, they let us know that they had knowledge of an unlawful system operating on the mainland. If that is the case, the scheme being proposed for the Republic of Ireland would, similarly, be unlawful under state aid rules. So the Government have a duty to allow us to scrutinise this properly. I welcome the fact that an amendment has been tabled, which we will get to debate later, and I hope the Government will be able to concede some of the points we have put to them and that we will be able to address those issues fairly.

I wish to end my remarks by referring to a couple of emails that I have received out of those from the hundreds of people who have been in touch with us. Whenever we boil things down to the actual person and family involved, we actually see what is happening. Jacqui and Thomas are from a farm family in my constituency. They said that the Department for the Economy has been “ignoring” them for months. They said that they have been emailing the Department, trying to make contact with it and sending it their questions about these matters when the consultation originally came out, but it has been ignoring “genuine RHI users”. Jacqui says: “I totally object to be financially punished for adhering to the requirements of the Scheme and blame this department for putting my farming business at risk.” That will have been repeated up and down the country, not just in my constituency, but across County Tyrone and in all of County Antrim, where we are a major food producer for these islands.

We must remember that this is largely about producing poultry that is sold in supermarkets up and down the UK. Most of the poultry eaten on this side of the channel is grown in County Antrim and County Tyrone. If this puts farm businesses at risk, it damages our food security and our biosecurity and everything is now at risk. That is the consequence of what we are doing; it damages businesses and it damages what we actually feed to our children. So let us address it and address it properly.

**Sammy Wilson:** Does my hon. Friend not think it is rather ironic that we have had all these debates in the House about the impact of Brexit on supply chains, yet here is a measure that, as he has rightly pointed out, could have a massive impact on the supply chain of the agri-food business in Northern Ireland and throughout the United Kingdom?

**Ian Paisley:** The consequences of and ripples out from this are so significant. It is not about cheap energy; it is about how we run our economy efficiently and effectively. What is our economy in Northern Ireland? It is principally small businesses that produce the best, viable, traceable, tastiest food in these islands. We are putting that at risk, and we are putting those jobs and farm families at risk. We really need to pause, and the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire gives us that opportunity to try to get this right. I look forward to the second part of proceedings.

5.25 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak in this House at any time, whether it be first or last—whatever the case may be—and I relish the opportunity to do so today. I wish to follow on from the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), my right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) and others, but I wish first to touch on the regional rates. Come 1 April, when many people get their regional rates bill, they will wonder exactly what it is that they are getting for their rates. They will ask that question because of the degree of increase, and I can understand that.

I definitely very much appreciate the city deal relationship that the Government have put forward, in association with my party and my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds), my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) and those further afield. The advantage of the city deal is that we in Strangford, North Down, East Antrim and South Antrim will also get some of the benefit, because it will ripple out to the towns and villages.

What can we do for the high street? I ask primarily because in just the past fortnight several shopkeepers in Ballynahinch, Newtownards and Comber in my constituency were asking whether there is any help for the high streets at this time. The initial reason for this debate was the rates, so perhaps the Minister or Secretary of State can give us some indication of that.

I was very pleased about the stronger towns scheme, which was referred to in last night’s debate and which will ripple across and affect every region of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We are not yet sure what the figures are going to be, but there is potential to help the high street and those from all over the United Kingdom.

I wish to dwell on the RHI issue and scheme. I thank the Secretary of State for moving the motion. The RHI scheme has been an issue of tremendous difficulty in Northern Ireland, although I must make it clear from the outset that it has been used as a weapon by abstentionist Sinn Féin to strong-arm and foist an Irish language Act, among other things, on the people of Northern Ireland. They used it for their own purpose—for what they wish to achieve. They are not holding out for the inquiry conclusion and report on RHI to come back to do their job. They are using an opportunity to circumvent democracy and impose their will on the people of Northern Ireland. That cannot be borne and nor should it be allowed.

I was not overly au fait with RHI. We were never asked directly to help a constituent to apply and I was not in the Assembly at that stage, so the articles I read in the paper were the foundation of most of my knowledge of the scheme. Of course, as time has passed, I have been contacted by genuine businesses in my constituency—those people who applied legitimately, honestly and fairly, who never abused the scheme at any stage, and who have used it appropriately. Pastors and ministers of churches applied for the scheme. Farmers, too, applied for the scheme for their chicken houses and so on. Many of them invested tens of thousands of pounds in the equipment to qualify for the scheme and it is for those people that I feel extremely aggrieved—those people who did it right but who now find themselves in a very awkward place.

There is no doubt in my mind that the scheme has been massively abused by some people who do not even keep the livestock or the broilers in the sheds as the heat
is far too much. They leave the windows open and are burning to make a profit. These people must realise that this cannot be acceptable and that they should not profit from this. They must be held to account.

However, by the same token, there are people who have loans based on an appropriate use of the scheme who may well not be able to pay those loans back and who will lose their businesses—not because they were greedy, but because they are using, and not abusing, the scheme. Let us be honest, when most of us have taken out a mortgage to buy a house or a new car, the bank manager will have always asked us how we would repay it. He would ask for a business plan for repayment or a direct debit. If the house is much more, he would look for collateral as well. Decisions to loan money—whether it be to a business or for a mortgage on a house—are based on a proven business plan, endorsed and agreed by the banks and, in this case, agreed by Government as well.

I wish to read out a letter from one of my constituents—I will not mention their name or where they are from in my constituency. Over the past few weeks, I have been contacted by many constituents —those who applied for the scheme and legitimately joined it on an honest basis. My constituent said:

“I am emailing to inform you of my circumstances as a poultry farmer in Co. Down in the constituency of Strangford. I have legitimate need for heat and I joined the scheme to make my business more sustainable, with the assurance of the 20-year RHI payment guarantee. Under this agreement, I took out substantial loans to purchase oil boilers whilst still repaying off debt associated to service, I could budget for this knowing that RHI payments were secure for 20 years. I had confidence in the scheme when I entered it because the scheme was Government run”—and so you would have—

“I now feel outraged that my business will suffer as a result of the lack of competence of some decision makers. It is not my fault that the rate was set too high, yet my business suffers as a result. I feel that I am being discriminated against; Northern Ireland is part of the UK so tariffs should have been set the same. I am already feeling the financial pressure to meet repayments and costs associated with running these boilers due to the 2017 amendments, but further cuts proposed by the DfE will leave my business under real threat.

Realistically, in order to keep my business running I will have to purchase oil boilers whilst still repaying off debt associated with the biomass. I don’t know where the money is going to come from, I therefore fear business closure. I would not have entered the scheme if the tariff was set at this proposed level! It is not financially viable! In addition, businesses from both communities in NI have joined the scheme—businesses from all parts of the community—

“I don’t understand why this has become a political issue. I hope you will support my business and do the right thing for the economy of NI by voicing my objection to the tariff cuts.”

That is one constituent of many who, under the deal that the Government introduced, went to the bank and got their loan with the tariffs. They did it the right way, yet they find themselves in a very serious position. These people have farmed all their lives. Their businesses are successful. They are family businesses; Northern Ireland is full of family businesses. These small and medium-sized enterprises across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland do great things for people and for their families. I despair that, through no fault of their own, my constituents find themselves in such financial difficulties.

Let me be clear that I am wholeheartedly behind a cut to the scheme, so that people burning ash to get cash cannot do so. However, the genuine people—the person I just spoke about and many others—will take a closer look at the 2019 GB scheme and see that alignment with this scheme would ensure that businesses, although not able to profit, will be able to survive. We want businesses to survive and to contribute to the Northern Ireland economy. That includes family farms. Individuals from churches and others also took out these schemes. The 2019 scheme is substantially lower than the original Northern Ireland scheme, and rightly so, but it also allows those who have invested more to recoup some of the running costs. My hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim and the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) referred to the buy-out scheme. That scheme indicates a certain legitimacy.

I stress again that this is not about retaining the current scheme or ensuring that people who abuse the scheme continue to do so; it is simply about a sensible UK-wide alignment that will not put genuine people out of business, while halting the systematic abuse. The Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee has tabled an amendment, which others have signed. It is important for us to give that amendment an opportunity so that we can see what can be done about the scheme. Hopefully, it will bring us a bit closer to finding a system for the honest people who have found themselves in great difficulty. We must have more time to consider this issue, and the amendment would give us that opportunity.

I urge the Secretary of State to give consideration to alignment with GB at this time, and to understand the dire straits that some of my constituents are facing due to the machinations of unscrupulous people and a scheme that we now realise was not fit for purpose when it was initiated. This situation is not of their making, and it seems grossly unfair for them to pay for it when there is a UK-wide answer.

5.36 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): During the wind-ups, it is customary to say that we have had a wide-ranging debate, but we have not. We have had a very narrow debate with very wide-ranging agreement, and there is a great deal of sadness at the fact that we are having to implement these measures.

I think we would all agree that it is a basic principle of any democracy that there should be no taxation without representation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) said, we do not really know how this 3% increase has been arrived at and we do not know the implications, yet we are being asked to agree to it. We are all facing rate increases in our local areas, and local taxation is a subject of great debate in our constituencies. Rate increases are a controversial matter that generally need to be justified and accounted for by local councillors, and reported to local people. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) expressed well, the impact on our high streets concerns most of us, yet again we are not really able to dig beneath the figure to see the implications of this decision.

The Government are once again cherry-picking what can and cannot be discussed, and what should and should not be done, here in Westminster. There has been no assessment or mitigation of the impact of this
decision and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) said in an intervention, there is no information about any support for those who face the impact of this decision, especially people on low incomes. As I said yesterday, we will of course support these measures this evening so that businesses can continue, but the situation really is highly unsatisfactory.

We all know that there is huge interest in the renewable heat incentive, particularly in Northern Ireland. Anyone following the inquiry will know how damaging this issue has been, further eroding confidence in Government and Government’s ability to deliver. I have been a member of the Public Accounts Committee, and I looked at some of the schemes operating in Britain, largely as a result of initiatives under the coalition Government. I think it was the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) who said that we must learn from the new large body of evidence across the United Kingdom about how incentives work in these sorts of schemes, and I agree with him. However, I do think—perhaps disagreeing with him—that these schemes have the laudable policy aim of reducing our dependence on fossil fuels.

Let me turn to how we have been considered in this process. The consultation closed in December. In that consultation, it was stated that legislation would be needed, so it was known by officials and the Secretary of State that we would come to the point at which someone would have to take legislative action. I ask the Minister—this has been raised by many other hon. Members—why we were not involved in those discussions before now, and why, as the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) said, we are again rushing through another important piece of legislation. I welcomed the opportunity, on behalf of the Opposition, to attend a briefing yesterday morning, although we were initially approached about it only on Monday evening. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) was not available for that briefing; many of us made ourselves available. We knew that legislation was coming, but there should really have been some sort of opportunity for pre-legislative scrutiny before we got to this point. I think that many of us would have made ourselves available for that, and then many of the questions that we rightly have could have been addressed.

Hon. Members have highlighted how this situation impacts on many good, genuine people who put their trust in Government. We have heard some examples today, and we have also received emails about the real impact on families and family businesses. It is fair to say, however, that the majority of individuals are not affected—and for the greater population, a decrease in the reliance on oil or fossil fuels is a good policy aim that we would support. There is not an awful lot of sun in Northern Ireland, but a fair amount of water and wind in order for renewable energy to play a really important role in future. It would be very unfortunate if this sorry episode blighted that developing agenda. This is important for the Department as it considers how to rebuild trust in any future schemes on renewable energy.

5.42 pm

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): I will try to address a series of specific points that various Members have made during the course of this debate. I will also try to address some of the broader questions, some of them quite fundamental, about the RHI scheme and its many and manifest problems and shortcomings. That is partly because those issues were raised in the debate, but also because we are going on to consider an amendment in Committee and it may help to have a bigger shared fact base. This will not answer all the questions that will, quite rightly, be raised in Committee, but it may at least lay the foundations of that debate and help us to address them at that stage.

As the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) rightly said, we have had quite a narrow debate although with widely shared views across the House. I strongly agree with one point that she made at the end of her remarks, which is that it is easy to forget, amid all the concern about the flaws in the RHI scheme, that it was introduced for a very noble purpose as part of an attempt to decarbonise our economy by increasing the amount of renewable energy in Northern Ireland. That is part of a broader tapestry of other initiatives that are being introduced right across the UK and, indeed, in other countries around the world. We clearly should not lose sight of that—it is a vitally important point.

Sammy Wilson: Does the Minister agree that it is rather ironic that a scheme that is meant to decarbonise—for some people that is important; for others it is just an expensive burden on the economy—finishes up with wood being put into pellet form in North America, brought in ships across the Atlantic ocean, and then burned in boilers here in the United Kingdom? Does he really think that is a way of cutting down on carbon emissions?

John Penrose: The right hon. Gentleman said that he was not quite sure why burning wood was any better than burning other things, because the emissions are similar. If my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) were here, he would make the point that we have to be extremely careful about how we calculate the carbon footprint of some supposedly renewable fuels, because if we cut down virgin rainforests to grow things that are then pelleted and burned, the overall genuine carbon footprint is much worse than people like to pretend.

However, my hon. Friend would also make a sharp distinction between what I think is called long-cycle carbon—in other words, fossil fuels, where carbon has been locked away for millions of years, are a net release that makes an overall difference to the level of carbon—and short-cycle carbon, which is a sort of short-term recycling whereby things are grown in the course of our lifetime and burned. I will not try your patience, Madam Deputy Speaker, by going into the detail of the level of greenery, but I hope we can all agree that this scheme, with all its manifest flaws, intended to pursue a noble purpose.

Before I go on to the details of the RHI scheme, I will address a few other points. The hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) asked a series of questions about Northern Ireland housing associations and, I think, was hoping to pin us down on when a piece of legislation might be introduced. I want to reassure him—my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made this point, but I will repeat it—that the Government will take that forward as soon as parliamentary time allows.
The hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) asked about the stronger towns fund and said that he did not feel he had enough of an answer yesterday; I want to ensure that we try to provide that today. He will be aware that the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government made an announcement yesterday. The Treasury will apply the Barnett formula in the normal way and confirm the funding for each region in due course. We do not know that yet, but it will come out, and we will seek to ensure that towns in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland can benefit, building on the success of the Government’s growth and city deals.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about the applicable costs of the RHI scheme. I will address that specific item before coming on to the broader points. The scheme guidance, which I am sure we are all itching to go through in huge detail, has been published, and it sets out clearly the eligible costs. They are primarily the costs of the boiler. He mentioned costs to do with installation, pipework and the like, and some of those are included as well. Interest costs on borrowing are apparently not included as an eligible cost in this scheme. I wanted to share that with everybody, so that we have a shared fact base before we go into Committee and discuss the detail of the amendment tabled by the Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison).

Questions have been posed about the up-front payments and how they would be calculated for people who wanted to opt out of the scheme because they felt that if they remained in it, they would lose out too badly. Straightforwardly, an individual’s costs—that means the cost of installation, the capital cost of the boiler and other eligible installation and running costs—will all be included, and they will be reimbursed up to the 12% target rate of return for the revised scheme. All the additional costs of the renewable technology above a fossil fuel one will be reimbursed. That is crucial, because a number of Members have raised questions about what happens to people who are worried that they are going to lose out. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) read out an email he received from someone with precisely those concerns. If they are concerned that it will not go into the scheme with the intention of abusing it, some of them were pastors in churches, and so on and so forth. The scheme was introduced for a good reason and, in the vast majority of cases, people entered into it for good reasons.

I therefore found it pretty shocking, and I am sure other people will share my shock, that of the participants involved—many of them with all the right intentions, as I have just described—80% have already, by today, received a 12% return for the entire 20 years of the scheme. If they did not get another penny piece, they would already have received a 12% return on their money. Even if there were another 14 years or however many years of the scheme left to run, since the day they entered it they have made a 12% return. The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) is absolutely right to raise the question of legitimate expectations, but the participants have done incredibly well.

Lady Hermon: The Minister needs to address the point raised by a number of right hon. and hon. Members about those who entered the scheme in good faith with the legitimate expectation that it would last for 20 years on a particular tariff. How do the Government square that and address that really key point?

John Penrose: I am very happy to address that point. There is one thing that I know a number of people have found shocking. In fact, the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson)—I am probably slightly misquoting him, but this is broadly speaking what he said—was right to say that the RHI scheme as originally conceived has turned out, in spite of everybody’s best efforts, to be both a failure and a disgrace. Very sadly, he absolutely accurately describes what has happened.

It is also true to say—the hon. Member for Strangford was quite right to make the point—that very many did not go into the scheme with the intention of abusing it. Some of them were pastors in churches, and so on and so forth. The scheme was introduced for a good reason and, in the vast majority of cases, people entered into it for good reasons.

I therefore found it pretty shocking, and I am sure other people will share my shock, that of the participants involved—many of them with all the right intentions, as I have just described—80% have already, by today, received a 12% return for the entire 20 years of the scheme. If they did not get another penny piece, they would already have received a 12% return on their money. Even if there were another 14 years or however many years of the scheme left to run, since the day they entered it they have made a 12% return. The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) is absolutely right to raise the question of legitimate expectations, but the participants have done incredibly well.

Jim Shannon rose—

John Penrose: I will come to the hon. Gentleman in a minute, if I may.

I remind Members that although the scheme as it was originally conceived was supposed to have an average return of 12%, the actual rate of return on average for people has been 50%—a 50% return on their money. That is extraordinary, particularly when we consider that that money comes out of taxpayers’ pockets. Quite legitimately, people have asked why provisions on the rates and on the RHI modifications have ended up in the same Bill. It is fair to say that there are only five substantive clauses in total for both those issues, but it is worth remembering that one of the reasons they are together is that the costs of this extraordinary bounty are not just magicked out of thin air or paid for by nobody.

Ian Paisley rose—

John Penrose: I will take interventions in a moment, but I want to finish this point.

The costs are paid for by taxpayers, and by ratepayers in Northern Ireland as much as by anybody else. It is important for us all to remember the fundamental injustice that this unintentional, but none the less very serious, miscalculation has caused. I will go on to talk about what the miscalculation was in a minute, but a number of colleagues want to intervene and I will go to the hon. Member for Strangford first.

Jim Shannon: I gave the example of one of my constituents, whose legitimate expectation was to have repayments over a 20-year period. He negotiated the loans accordingly at a bank—the bank is very strict when it comes to borrowing money—and invested somewhere between £250,000 and £500,000, as did some other constituents. Given the expectation of a 20-year roll-out, the impact on these small businesses and family farms will be extensive. Is it not right that the 20-year long-term plan should be delivered?

John Penrose: Some people will have done very well out of this scheme, but I think the House will have a great deal more sympathy with those who have received below the average. I think that is the point the hon.
Gentleman is making. The average may be extremely high and some people have done extremely well, even including those who have not run their boilers all the time, lived with the windows open and so on, and he gave examples of people who have not done that. Those who have received well below the average and are worried that they are going to lose out because they are well below the 50% average rate of return that has been achieved so far will still be able to opt out and will be made good. None of the historical payments they have received will be counted if they decide to opt out, and they will basically be told, “You will have a 12% return based on the money you’ve invested so far.” There is a route out for people who are worried; they will still be made whole and should not lose out. They may not make out extraordinarily or become rich, but 12% is a return that many of us would be very happy to earn on most other investments.

Tony Lloyd: I am grateful that the Minister is being so generous with his time. None of us has any brief for those who have done extraordinarily well out of all this; they should not have been allowed to be so lucky, but we should not let that delay us. The reality is that it is accepted as part of the scheme that there may be losers, as is recognised in the buy-out clause that the Secretary of State and the Minister pray in aid. A 12% return seems quite a good rate, but the fundamental problem is that the cost that the Minister tells us will be allowable as the basis for that return is not the same as the cost of the boiler plus installation. We need a guarantee that the problems faced by the potential losers will not be compounded by an incompetently designed buy-out scheme that cannot work for them financially.

John Penrose: I am delighted to be able to set the record straight. I think that I have already mentioned this, but perhaps I can expand on it: the point about the buy-out scheme is that it will be a 20% return—sorry, it is minus payments already made; I misspoke. It is a 12% return on the capital costs of the boiler and the other eligible installation and running costs that I mentioned in my reply to the hon. Member for North Down. It will be tailored to individual circumstances, and obviously people will need to produce receipts and so on, but if they have ended up paying slightly more for their boiler, they will not lose out. The hon. Member for Rochdale raises a perfectly valid question, but people who might otherwise lose out should be made whole, as the hon. Member for Strangford pointed out.

Ian Paisley: I appreciate that the Minister is making the case that has been given to him by the Department, but the crucial thing is how we set the average, because that is the basis of the calculation. The shadow Minister cited a cost to a constituent of £76,237, which suggests that the average cannot be £35,000. The more general average cost of the scheme in Northern Ireland appears to be settling at £44,607, but the Department in Northern Ireland has set the average at £35,900. If that average is the basis of the calculation. The shadow Minister accepted as part of the scheme that there may be losers, those who have done extraordinarily well out of all this; some will do better, while some will do worse. That is why the buy-out scheme for those who will potentially lose out is so important. It is also worth while pointing out that the average rate of return is directly comparable across the rest of the UK. It will become 12% in Northern Ireland and it is 12% in Great Britain. As I understand it and for what it is worth—I appreciate this is of tangential relevance, but it is perhaps interesting information—the intended return of the Republic of Ireland scheme is 8%, not 12%.

Lady Hermon: The Minister, in response to a number of interventions, has repeatedly relied on data and detailed figures. Can he confirm that they are not in secret documents held in confidence within the Department for the Economy, and that they could be made public tonight and put in the House of Commons Library? I ask for the calculations to be published in the House of Commons Library within the next 24 hours. It is outrageous that we are being asked to approve a Bill tonight based on facts and figures that I certainly have not had sight of—perhaps others have—and I would like them to be made publicly available to the House within 24 hours.

John Penrose: There is an old saying that if you want something to be kept secret, you announce it on the Floor of the House of Commons and nobody will pay a blind bit of attention. I am trying to put some of the facts in, but I take the hon. Lady’s point. I will see if inspiration strikes me later on in my remarks as to whether that can be done, or whether my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State can help in that regard. It is clear from everyone’s remarks on Second Reading that there is not just a thirst and an appetite but a genuine democratic need for proper scrutiny and for more details to be understood. That is what I am trying to do by what I am laying out now, but I take the hon. Lady’s point. Other Members have made a similar point. We had comments to that effect from my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire the Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) the SNP spokesman, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), and the hon. Members for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), for North Antrim, for Strangford and for Bristol South.

I hope we have dealt with quite a lot of the points that were raised. The one point that I think remains at this stage—I am sure we will get into more detail in Committee in a moment—relates to process. Before I go any further, I should mention that a number of colleagues—there is clearly a political movement in
North Antrim and in East Antrim—are pretty leery and worried about state aid rules. The hon. Member for North Antrim and the right hon. Member for East Antrim both raised this point and asked whether the state aid rules would continue after we leave the European Union. I am not sure if I am pleased or sorry to disappoint them both, but the answer is yes they will. We have agreed to port across, to begin with at least, all EU rules into UK law, including, obviously, state aid rules. They are both absolutely right to point out that it will then be up to this Parliament, rather than anybody else, to change them if we want.

However, we all need to be a little careful about what we wish for. For those of us who are free marketeers and free traders, or even those of us who are not but just want to see fair play, the changing of state aid rules needs to be approached with great care, because it can easily either slant the playing field in favour of foreign firms trying to export into Britain in ways that are unfair for British manufacturers and British producers, or alternatively create political favouritism and lobbying games. So we would need to approach that with a great degree of care. I know that it would be approached with a great deal of care on both sides of the aisle. It is theoretically possible, but on day one, I am sorry to tell the hon. Gentlemen from Antrim, they will not be changed and they will still apply.

Inspiration has just struck. I understand that the figures the hon. Member for North Down was asking about have already been published. They were published last May. We are trying to track down precisely where they are in order to make sure that they are properly available. I will come back to her, or my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will come back to her, with the final version of the figures and make sure they are properly available. If we cannot track them down, we will try to come up with duplicates if we can.

Lady Hermon: The Minister said that the figures have been published. What I would really like are the calculations underlying those figures. We need to know how the figures were arrived at. Are those calculations in the public domain or can they be put in the public domain? That is what I would like to see.

John Penrose: I think the answer to the hon. Lady’s question is yes. I have not actually seen the figures—the ones published in May—but we will endeavour to clarify that and get them out there for her as soon as we can.

Let me finish by saying that there is a link between the decisions that have been taken by the Executive and where we are today. A number of colleagues asked whether the sunset clause will apply if we do not take a decision today. I remind people that back in March 2015, the Executive at the time took the decision to introduce some caps. Those were renewed roughly this time last year and expire at the end of March this year. That is the reason why we are so concerned about the timescale. I appreciate that this does not answer some of the questions about why we are having this conversation today rather than two weeks ago, or whenever it might be, but I reassure people that this is not something that someone has plucked out of the air. It has been extended on an annualised, fixed-term basis and is therefore due to expire at the end of this month. That is why this needs to be dealt with and sorted out, so that roughly 1,800 of the people who currently receive money can at least have the legal option of continuing to receive that money in future.

I should just say to the hon. Member for Gedling, who was muttering in concern, that when I said I had not seen the figures, I was talking about the precise figures that were published back in May. I have not seen those particular documents and therefore do not want to speak to what may or may not be in them at this stage rather than the broader point.

With that, I will sit down and let us move on to a more detailed conversation in Committee about the RHI scheme because there is clearly a material appetite to do that, and I do not want to stand in anybody’s way.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.
Northern Ireland (Regional Rates and Energy) (No. 2) Bill

Considered in Committee (Order, this day)

[SIR LINDSAY HOYLE in the Chair]

6.8 pm

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Lindsay Hoyle):
I must inform the Committee that I have selected the amendment and the new clause tabled by the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison).

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2

INTRODUCTORY

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Chairman: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:
Clauses 3 to 5 stand part.
Amendment 1, in clause 6, page 5, line 26, at end add—
“(4) Section (Regulations) comes into force at the end of the period of 3 months beginning with the day on which this Act is passed.”

Clauses 6 and 7 stand part.

New clause 1—Regulations—
“(1) The Secretary of State may make regulations by statutory instrument amending any provision within sections 2 to 5 of this Act or within the Schedule to this Act.
(2) Regulations under this section may not be made unless a draft of the statutory instrument containing them has been laid before Parliament and approved by resolution of each House of Parliament.
(3) The Secretary of State may lay draft regulations under this section before Parliament only if the draft regulations take account of any relevant recommendations made by any select committee of the House of Commons.”

The purpose of this new clause is to ensure prior consultation, and full and proper scrutiny, of proposed changes to the renewable heat incentive scheme in order to ensure that current participants are not disadvantaged by changes to the scheme.

That the Schedule be the schedule to the Bill.

Karen Bradley: We have had significant debate on this matter on Second Reading and I do not wish to prolong proceedings any further at this stage. I look forward to hearing from right hon. and hon. Members.

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to you for calling me to speak in this stage of our proceedings, Sir Lindsay. The complexity of the Bill, apart from clause 1, has been demonstrated by the level of discussion that we have had. That really underscores the need for full and proper scrutiny of this Bill. Forcing this through all its stages in a day is a challenge, and I fear we have not explored sufficiently the complexity of this matter. It is a matter that bears on the lives of many people in Northern Ireland and we must get it right. I know the Secretary of State is as keen as I am to ensure that that happens.

I am grateful to the parliamentary draftsmen for their assistance in crafting my new clause, which is available in manuscript form. It turns what I thought would be a simple matter—that of dividing the largely uncontroversial part of the Bill from the more difficult bit on the RHI—into something that, in my mind, is really quite complicated, but that is the nature of this place and of parliamentary draftsmanship. We cannot consider these two parts separately and be sure the matter will be finalised in time for people to get their money on 1 April, so in consultation with parliamentary draftsmen, we have devised a new clause and an amendment to clause 6, which is the commencement clause.

I am grateful to the members of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee who have co-signed the new clause and amendment. I have appended to the new clause what I hope is a helpful explanatory statement. It explains that the new clause is essentially a patch-up job that I hope will help to facilitate consultation and fuller and better scrutiny of proposed changes to the renewable heat incentive scheme to ensure that current participants are not disadvantaged by changes to the scheme. I appreciate that this is imperfect—I would have preferred for it to be dealt with separately and for the Bill to have been divided into two parts to allow for a proper debate on the RHI clauses and schedule—but I accept that we are faced with the choice of supporting the Bill or not and that if we do not support it many people will be financially disadvantaged, which is not acceptable. I hope that the new clause provides a mechanism for scrutinising this matter, albeit imperfectly, and for making recommendations that the Secretary of State might implement to ensure that as few people as possible are disadvantaged.

I am not in the business of job creation, and I gently point out that my Select Committee is the most productive in the House of Commons, according to figures I have seen—we are pretty busy, particularly at the moment—but it might be thought a proper Select Committee to undertake this work. If so, I will discuss it with my Committee, but I make no prescription. I am quite clear that this complicated element of our business needs proper detailed scrutiny and that we need to see and examine the data produced.

Several right hon. and hon. Members have been a little critical of the Department for the Economy. It is after all implicated in this situation, as the informatics it produced and the advice it gave are partly to blame for where we are, and that means we are doubly obliged to examine closely any material it has produced. That is fair and proper scrutiny. I gently suggest that whichever Select Committee undertakes this work focus heavily on that information so that we can be clear what is being recommended to the Secretary of State and are better able to make recommendations to minimise the hard cases that we are all concerned about in the course of this legislation. I hope she will consider the amendments carefully, and I look forward to hearing what she has to say.

6.15 pm

Tony Lloyd: In his closing remarks, the Minister, who I believe was trying to be helpful, talked about the further exchanges that might take place in Committee. However, I think it would be remarkably difficult to prolong this debate in any meaningful detail, because of the granularity that was drawn to our attention by the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison). It will be about real-life cases of “winners, probably not, but losers, almost certainly”, which will become
apparent only following the passage of some time. In that sense, I think the hon. Gentleman made an intelligent proposal when he said that we should consider how to proceed with pre-legislative scrutiny, and, indeed, I called for that on Second Reading.

In that context, I strongly support the new clause. As the hon. Gentleman said, it is not the perfect way forward, and it is probably not the best-structured way of achieving his ambitions and the wishes of other Members for adequate scrutiny, but it may well be the best that that we can achieve. I have confidence in the members of his Committee—I must have confidence in those colleagues of ours—because they do at least have a legitimate track record of both interest in the affairs of Northern Ireland and a determination to use the power of the Committee not only to hold the United Kingdom Government to account but increasingly, in this period of non-devolution, to raise matters that cannot be properly scrutinised in the context of Stormont. Ideally, if the world were different, there would be the equivalent of our Public Accounts Committee at Stormont level, but, although it existed in a functioning Stormont, it does not exist in the current circumstances.

I do not think I need to say any more, except that we support the new clause, although I am sure that if the Secretary of State has ambitions to take such action in support of the new clause, although I am sure that if the current circumstances.

Ian Paisley: It is always an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Lindsay.

I support the new clause. It has the overwhelming support of the parties here and of the Select Committee, which has been rightly identified as the Committee that should try to organise the scrutiny. I approve of the requirement in the new clause that the Secretary of State should bear in mind “any relevant recommendations made by any select committee of the House”.

A number of points were made on Second Reading but, in particular, Members asked where the evidence came from and on what we were basing this, and my hon. Friend the Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) asked whether we could see the material. Yesterday was the first time that I, and many of my colleagues, were able to see the material on which tonight’s discussion is based. I have it in my hand. There is not a lot of it: it contains 300 words and three graphs. On the basis of a 300-word document with three graphs, we are being asked to agree a multi-million-pound subsidy cut in Northern Ireland. That is not right.

This requires scrutiny. Those 300 words may have convinced some people, and the Minister made a very good fist of making the case, but they are not a compelling argument. We need to be able to see the evidence that has convinced the Department that it is doing right and the rest of the United Kingdom is doing wrong, and that, if the Irish Republic comes on stream, it too will be doing wrong. We need to see the evidence for those claims.

I asked a few questions that need to be answered by the Secretary of State or her senior officials. That can happen only in a Committee, because they have not been answered on Second Reading, and I do not know if they will be answered in Committee. I welcome the new clause that has been tabled by colleagues; I hope that it attracts support and that the Secretary of State can demonstrate to us, if she does not want us to accept it, that she will take cognisance of what a Committee will say and of scrutiny that will actually take place.

Karen Bradley: I recognise the concern of Members and the spirit of this amendment, which seeks to provide for additional time and scrutiny. As I have said, I empathise with the participants in the scheme. I have been very clear, during discussion both of yesterday’s legislative measures and today’s, that this situation and this process are far from ideal. What I and I think everybody in this Chamber wants to see is scrutiny of Northern Ireland policies by locally elected politicians. Nevertheless, I am committed to bringing forward measures on behalf of Northern Ireland where they are critical to good governance, as these two Bills are. I remind Members about the point I raised yesterday about the normal estimates process: by taking this legislation through as primary legislation in this House, rather than subordinate legislation, as it would have been in the Assembly, we are affording a higher degree of scrutiny and accountability to these measures.

My hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, is right that full and proper scrutiny is what we need, and he is right to challenge us. He is also right to say that we must get this right, and I appreciate that his amendment would afford more time for scrutiny and offer a mechanism by which more scrutiny could be delivered.

The Northern Ireland RHI scheme has probably received more public scrutiny than any other. I have already mentioned the public inquiry into the scheme, which has interrogated myriad aspects of the scheme in detail, but additionally and specifically on these new tariffs, the Department for the Economy held an extensive public consultation from June to September 2018. That included making public the evidence base used by the independent experts who generated the tariffs. I believe that information is on the Department for the Economy website and we are looking to see if we can find it quickly and provide a link to it as soon as possible.

The Department held pre-consultation events for stakeholders, including all the local political parties and key representative groups, including the Ulster Farmers’ Union and the Renewable Heat Association Northern Ireland. Following the closure of the consultation, the Department set out its analysis and response in January 2019 and said that final proposals for the revised tariffs would be delivered in February this year. The Department and my officials have in recent weeks briefed parliamentarians and local parties on the new tariffs and the new legislative measures before us, including the new buy-out clause. My hon. Friend’s suggestion that there may be a role for further scrutiny in either his Committee or another Committee in the House is very welcome and I certainly would appreciate that.

With regard to the timing of the legislation today, it is important to recognise the comprehensive and technical nature of the work involved. As I have mentioned, the Department for the Economy engaged independent experts to carry out a painstakingly detailed review of the scheme, went through a full public consultation
exercise and more recently an extensive discussion with the European Commission on state aid. These discussions only reached a conclusion at the end of January, meaning the Department for the Economy could not finalise its position any earlier. The current legislation is sunsetted and a failure to enact the clauses before us will mean more than 1,800 participants will not be able to be paid by 1 April.

Ian Paisley: On that point—I think this is critical and is probably subject to the judicial review at the present time—is it the case that payments stop? Is that the opinion of the barristers advising the Department? Or is it the case that this reverts to the original payments scheme? There is contrary advice on this and the Secretary of State must be clear with us which advice she is taking and why.

Karen Bradley: The advice I have received is that the payments will stop, because there will be no legal basis on which to make any payments. The payments that are currently being made have been found to breach state aid rules, so there is no legal basis on which to continue to make payments. The payments with the cost-capping involved expire on 31 March. The Department cannot go back to the original payments, because they would be illegal payments, and we will not have any other mechanism by which legal payments can be made after 31 March. I recognise that this is far from ideal, but the facts of the situation have meant that an expedited process is required.

Ian Paisley: The Secretary of State says that we cannot go back to the original payments, but I do not think that anyone is asking for that. However, the payments were stepped down, and I understand that she could continue with those stepped-down payments.

Karen Bradley: I cannot continue with those, because the advice that I have is that to continue with them would be illegal. Under the ministerial code, I cannot, as a Minister of the Crown, legislate for something that I am advised is illegal. So I am left in a very difficult situation. I understand how people feel about this. I empathise with people and I understand the implications for them of a reduction, but as Secretary of State, legislating for something that none of us wants to be legislating for in this place, I am faced with the choice of legislating for something that is legal, to allow some subsidies to continue, or not legislating, which would result in no subsidies happening after 31 March. The legal basis on which the reduced subsidies, as set out by the Executive, are paid expires on 31 March.

Dr Murrison: I appreciate the Secretary of State’s dilemma. She is having to act on the basis of advice that she is getting from the Department for the Economy, a Department whose advice has been shown to be flawed in the past. Does she understand that we need to examine this closely? She has been told that, legally, she has to do this, and we in this place have to accept that, but we also have to scrutinise the legislation. I hope that she can give me sufficient reassurance that she will note our examination of this matter and our recommendations on it, and that she will not take at face value the advice that she has been given from a Department that has erred in the past. I very much hope that she will be able to tailor her remarks accordingly, and I am all agog as to what commitment she can give to providing the scrutiny that I have described in my amendment.

Karen Bradley: I thank my hon. Friend for his questions, and I will come on specifically to those points in a moment.

I want to come back to the question of whether there is an option to delay. I agree with the principle and intention behind the amendment, but it is not the solution to the wider problem. As I have said, the tariffs set out in the legislation are the only tariffs available that will bring the returns on the scheme into line with the 12% approved by state aid. The tariffs strike a fair balance between the interests of scheme participants and the wider public interest, in ensuring that the Northern Ireland budget and public services are protected and that taxpayers’ money is spent to achieve value for money. The only lawful alternative would be the closure of the scheme.

Paul Girvan: In relation to the figures that are being presented, I have done a very simple back-of-the-envelope calculation—perhaps not a very wise thing to do—of the payments that would have been received in the early stages at the maximum permissible amount. If we calculate that in, then take the reduction over the next couple of years that has been calculated in, then multiply by the factor that has been put forward, it comes out at 3.1 times less than what the rest of GB is getting on the average tariff.

Karen Bradley: I hope that the scrutiny that the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee has offered will help to address a number of those issues. I know that there is concern about the differences between the scheme in GB and the scheme in Northern Ireland. I am not using a visual aid here, but I can assure Members that we have a copy of the document that is on the Department for the Economy website. It is available for download, and we would be happy to send a link to all Members here today, to ensure that they have an opportunity to see the very detailed information, tables and calculations, which I am sure they will absorb and enjoy.

To resume, delay of the legislative measures, such as the amendment would achieve, would serve only to put at risk payments to all the participants in the scheme. For there to be a lawful basis for the RHI scheme come 1 April, the legislative process and Royal Assent need to be completed by 31 March. The current tariffs are designed to pay the maximum 12% rate of return to a typical participant, so there is no lawful way to introduce higher tariffs to the scheme. A delay would not change that fundamental issue.

6.30 pm

I support the principle of the amendment of my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire, but the lasting solution to the issues that he and others have raised is that these matters are best addressed and scrutinised by a restored Executive in Northern Ireland. In the absence of a functioning Assembly, it is vital that we provide the statutory footing needed to allow the scheme to continue to ensure that boiler owners continue to receive payments from 1 April.
To go back to the comments made by my hon. Friend, I hope that the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, or another Committee of this House will now spend time looking at the issue. As the Secretary of State, I will consider carefully any recommendations made with regard to it, in particular any on helping those in hardship. We all agree that no one wants people who entered the scheme in good faith, and because they believed they were doing the right thing, to face financial hardship. We want to ensure that they have the reassurance that they need that everything we could do has been done.

On the basis of that position, and of my commitment to work with the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and to look carefully at his recommendations, I hope that he will not move his amendment.

Question put and agreed to.
Clause 2 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.
Clauses 3 to 7 ordered to stand part of the Bill.
Schedule agreed to.
The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.
Bill reported, without amendment.
Third Reading

6.33 pm
Karen Bradley: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.
I thank everyone who has participated in this debate and the one yesterday. We have had a good discussion. We are all dissatisfied with the level of scrutiny afforded to these measures in the absence of an Executive, but I think it is fair to say that the debates in this Chamber yesterday and today have meant that there has been scrutiny and that we have aired a number of the issues that right hon. and hon. Members wished to air. I thank my Minister of State, the Minister in the other place, the Whips, the Opposition, the Scottish National party, the Members from the Democratic Unionist party and the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) for their participation over the past two days. Finally, I thank the Bill officials because, if it were not for the people who spend hours and hours coming up with the very technical points and working incredibly hard through that, we would not be able to deliver in this place in the way that we do.

6.34 pm
Tony Lloyd: I reiterate to the Secretary of State that these proceedings are not satisfactory. Everyone recognises the legal imperative to make sure there is a scheme in operation, and therefore there is time pressure, but none of us accepts that this is the right use of the parliamentary process. It would still have been undesirable had we separated the two very different strands of the Bill, one relatively non-controversial and the other significantly controversial. To be honest, we are still lacking in adequate answers to the many questions that have been raised on the Floor of the House, including in Committee, today.
I appreciate the efforts of the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), the Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, to move forward on the question of scrutiny. I accept that he understood the need not to press the amendment, but that was on the basis that the Secretary of State is committed to making sure that she listens carefully and closely to any recommendations that come from that Select Committee, which is now most important.

It may well be that the Secretary of State and the Minister are right in their ambition that there will be no losers. I think everyone in this House wants a scheme that does not see winners moving away to the bank in quite the luxury they did before. Equally, there is a determination to ensure that, if there are people who lose out, we are not putting viable businesses and people’s livelihoods and incomes at risk. In that sense, I recommend that the Chairman and the members of the Select Committee now take forward the work of proper scrutiny in a way that simply has not been done up to this point.

6.37 pm
Dr Murrison: I thank the Secretary of State for listening to the concerns expressed and articulated through my amendments. I note her remarks from the Dispatch Box that she will carefully consider the result of further scrutiny of this Bill and any recommendations that my Committee, or any other Committee, might make on how to ensure that this necessary measure does not disadvantage businesses in Northern Ireland. I look forward, if my Select Committee agrees to undertake this work, to the scrutiny that the Bill deserves, so far as we are able to provide it, and to making recommendations to her in very short order. I particularly look forward to her response to any recommendations that we might make.

6.37 pm
Ian Paisley: The shadow Secretary of State put his finger on it when he said that this is not a satisfactory process by which to scrutinise legislation. We have kicked that one around a lot today, and there is general agreement that the process could be better, whether through a functioning Assembly or through Northern Ireland business not being conducted in this truncated manner—either would be very beneficial.

It would, however, be remiss of me not to thank the Secretary of State, the Minister of State and their officials for helping us in recent days, especially on the non-controversial aspects of what we have debated today, namely the rates bill. Of course, we would like to see some elements tweaked further but, by and large, it has been a success story. It could have been a very different story. We could have been looking at a 12-point rate hike, which was averted largely down to the hard work of officials and Members of this House. We welcome that, and it would be remiss of me not to put that word of thanks on the record.

I agree with the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), the Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, that we look forward to scrutinising this matter further. I hope the Secretary of State will make herself, the Minister or, indeed, senior officials available to whatever Committee ultimately considers the Bill so that the probing questions asked here today can be properly scrutinised. We look forward to
Business without Debate

JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE DRAFT DOMESTIC ABUSE BILL

Ordered,

That Dr Philippa Whitford be discharged from the Joint Committee on the Draft Domestic Abuse Bill and Liz Saville Roberts be added.—(Amanda Milling.)

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 6 to 14 together.

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

(MERCHANT SHIPPING)

That the draft Merchant Shipping (Passengers’ Rights) (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 17 January, be approved.

That the draft Merchant Shipping (Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 29 January, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

(DESIGNS)

That the draft Designs and International Trade Marks (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

(AGRICULTURE)

That the draft Specific Food Hygiene (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.

That the draft General Food Law (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.

That the draft General Food Law (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.

That the draft Greater Manchester Combined Authority (Functions and Amendment) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 30 January, be approved.

That the draft Forestry and Land Management (Scotland) Act 2018 (Consequential Provisions and Modifications) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 11 February, be approved.—(Amanda Milling.)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Closure and relocation of Solihull Post Office

6.39 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): My constituents are deeply concerned by proposals from the Post Office to close its large, accessible branch in Mell Square, in the town centre, and to replace it with a counter on the first floor of the nearby branch of WHSmith. An official public consultation on the move by the Post Office closes today. Although it invited residents’ views on many important questions, especially regarding site accessibility and the impact on the wider community, it explicitly did not allow them to pass judgment on the move itself. It is not right that a growing town such as Solihull is facing such cuts to important community resources such as our local post office. That almost 1,000 of my constituents signed this petition shows that their objection to the Post Office’s plans runs deeper than the fine details, and it is a privilege to put their concerns directly to this House today.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Solihull,
Declares that local residents have concerns over the proposed closure and relocation of Solihull Post Office, Mell Square.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Post Office to re-consider the closure of the Solihull Post Office in Mell Square due to its size and accessibility.

And the petitioners remain, etc.
Special Educational Needs: Wiltshire

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Amanda Milling.)

6.41 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Society can be judged by the quality of the provision it makes for its most vulnerable members. I therefore welcome this opportunity to raise the situation of vulnerable people in my constituency, particularly those who have special educational needs.

Last week, the consultation ended on Wiltshire Council’s plans for a dramatic change to the provision for children with SEN in the county, and I would like to begin by highly commending Wiltshire Council for prioritising special needs and for being prepared to pledge serious money—£20 million—on a root-and-branch upgrade to provision for children who have complex and severe learning and physical disabilities. That does Wiltshire Council a great deal of credit, and I pay tribute to the councillors and officials involved in trying to make things better for some of my most vulnerable constituents.

However, the edge was taken off that for me when I was summoned at the end of last year to hear precisely what the council was planning to do with the money it wants to spend. I wish to take some time this evening discussing that and impressing upon the Minister how important it is that the council thinks again. Survey data shows just how unpopular the council’s approach is, closing, as it does, two well-loved schools that are at the very heart of their communities in order to create a very big one in a relatively remote location. I hope the local authority will listen to concerns expressed and adopt a different model for my most vulnerable young constituents that retains at least one of the threatened schools.

I want the Minister to help, because the Government have already been quite helpful: they have helped with £350 million in new funding for SEN announced in December; they have helped through the dedicated schools grant, with an 11% uplift in real terms for high needs between 2014-15 and 2019-20; and they have helped through the Children and Families Act 2014.

A key feature of that legislation was the SEN “local offer” that local authorities are now required to make. The offer has to be developed in partnership with the children and young people involved, their families and the relevant professionals. The attached code of practice is clear: it expects the local offer, from birth to age 25, to be developed and revised over time through regular review and consultation. Indeed, that collaborative, consultative approach runs through the legislation like a vein through granite. It is mandated; it is not an optional extra; it does not mean the local authority will listen to concerns expressed and adopt a different model for my most vulnerable young constituents that retains at least one of the threatened schools.

Wiltshire Council has for some time wanted to close smaller special schools. We got wind of a warming-up exercise last year, when a member of the council made some adverse remarks about the inadequacy of hoists at Larkrise School in Trowbridge—claims that were incorrect and had to be retracted. It all runs contrary to the approach encouraged by the 2014 Act and its associated code of practice. Wiltshire Council’s vision for special education in Wiltshire is in many ways an exemplary document—it says all the right things—but at its heart it would close two schools, one in my constituency and one in that of my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan): Larkrise in Trowbridge and St Nicholas in Chippenham.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this issue forward. As Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, he will know only too well the experiences we have had in Northern Ireland in relation to special needs education. The increasing demands on special needs education are exceptional. In England, some 1.3 million children are in special needs education and needing it. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need sweeping reform of the support available to pupils and schools to ensure, as he, I and everyone in the House would agree, that a pupil is not prevented from reaching their potential because of a lack of support services available in their postcode? What he needs in Wiltshire, we also need in Northern Ireland.

Dr Murrison: I of course agree with the hon. Gentleman. I was once a governor at a special school, before I was elected. If I reflect on the provision then and the provision now, I am quite clear that matters have improved, but that does not mean to say that we should be complacent. What the hon. Gentleman said is correct: we need to ensure that every child has the ability to reach his or her potential. That is as true of a mainstream child who is going to become a doctor or a lawyer—or even a politician—as it is for a child at a special needs school whose horizons, in a classic sense, are necessarily going to be rather more limited. They are equally important and their potential needs to be maximised.

The proposition before the council is that it closes two schools and builds a big school on the site of a third one. That would be a very big school by SEN standards, and many of us have concerns about that, because this particular subset of the school population undoubtedly benefits from a provision that is more intimate than perhaps would be necessary for their mainstream compatriots. That would necessarily not be the case were this big school to be created in place of the ones it would replace. The council refers to the big school as a centre of excellence, but my contention is that we already have a centre of excellence in my constituency—it is called Larkrise School.

The claim is made that Larkrise is bursting at the seams and that its facilities and equipment are insufficient, but there is more to a school than bricks and mortar, and there is more to a special school than hoists. The school community understands that, which is why it is so opposed to the local authority’s prescription. It is clear that, being strapped for cash, the council has to balance the books. Rightly, it worries about the financial deficits that have been projected for each of the special educational needs schools, but deficits are projected at several mainstream schools, too, and nobody is suggesting that the solution is to close them.

The county’s financial position is not helped by its having to place 300 special educational needs pupils outside Wiltshire because of the long-standing insufficiency of in-county provision. Those of us who represent seats
in Wiltshire will be well used to people attending our advice surgeries to discuss that. The council wants to remedy this out-of-county placement situation by creating a new school with 350 places serving the north of the county. Although the way that the numbers are presented in the consultation documents makes comparison very difficult, 350 places seems inadequate to cope with the planned closures, the out-of-county placements and the growth that is projected given local population increases, housing demand, and the recently announced moves of the residue of the British Army in Germany largely to Wiltshire and the need to accommodate them. Even by its own arithmetic, the council appears to be set on under-provision. That means that out-of-county provision is bound to continue, that projected spend on the new school will be greatly exceeded, or that the new school will very quickly become overcrowded, or, more likely, a combination of all three.

The plans anticipate no sixth form. Instead reliance will be placed on the county’s further education college, Wiltshire College, for 16 to 19 provision, together with a vaguely defined private provision. No further details are given. For example, we do not know how many days a week pupils aged 16 to 19 will have.

All this is of great concern as SEN pupils across the UK have been let down historically in our system in the transition from school to adulthood—from school to life as supported young people in the community. Provision for 16 to 19 is absolutely crucial in this transition. Wiltshire Council’s own consultation documents assert that the new centre of excellence will be able to provide what is called “outreach capacity to support mainstream schools.”

It is not clear what is meant by that. On the face of it, there is a risk that resource will be diverted from the severe and profound to the milder end of the SEN spectrum. That is surely not what is intended. If it is, it needs to be stated in plain terms. The perception is not helped by the confusing terminology used in the text and the apparent misunderstanding of which schools currently offer what, in what is admittedly a complex and overlapping needs mix. Response to the consultation has rightly honed in on that.

Last month, I took part in a march in Trowbridge in support of the threatened schools. Predictably, there were children, parents and teachers, but what struck me was the number of ordinary citizens with no direct link to the school. The orthodoxy is that society wants people with disabilities of the kind that special schools deal with to be hidden away. The orthodoxy is that society is embarrassed by them and that they make it feel uncomfortable. Well, that may be the orthodoxy but it is not true in Trowbridge. Larkrise has a very special ethos. It does not believe in the hiding away of kids with the most profound difficulties. Its students are part of the local scene, out and about in the community. Nobody gawps at them, looks away or across the road, because they are an accepted and expected part of the community. They are recognised, welcomed, and helped in the shops, and that does not happen by accident.

We must not hide special needs children away in remote, large, impersonal facilities, miles from their homes and communities. That is the very opposite of inclusion. It is segregation. Now I know that that is not the intent of the council, but it would be the consequence of its plans as drafted. Mobility today means that, like as not, children in mainstream schools will make their adult lives away from the towns in which they grew up, but children with special educational needs are much more likely to remain. Where they are is where they will be. Larkrise understands that, which is why its staff, ably led by headteacher Phil Cook, have put so much effort into local involvement and ensuring that their children are integrated in the community. I know that a similar situation applies at St Nicholas.

It is not surprising that, in its latest report, Ofsted rated Larkrise as “good”. It is surprising that the council believes that shutting this good school in Wiltshire’s county town should be part of its plans for raising standards. That is particularly so, as the council’s own task group stated that “it would not be appropriate to combine all three schools into one site”.

and its “School Places Strategy” document says that children are best educated at the heart of the community—absolutely.

Over the year, parents with statemented children, and now children with educational health and care plans, have been to see me in my advice surgery. Invariably, the issue is not directly about care or education, but about transport.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and speaking out so passionately for his constituents in Trowbridge. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) on speaking out for the parents from St Nicholas. Does my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) accept that there are a great many children with special educational needs throughout the county for whom Rowdeford would actually be a great deal more convenient than either Trowbridge or Chippenham, and that what the county is proposing—a £20 million investment to build a really state-of-the-art school—might well be welcomed by children with special educational needs across the whole of the northern county, leaving aside his own town of Trowbridge?

Dr Murrison: I am particularly grateful for my hon. Friend’s presence here today, and the presence of my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham. I join my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) on speaking out for the parents from St Nicholas. Does my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) in welcoming the extra money that is going into special educational needs, and I commend the council for that, but it is counterintuitive to suppose that the replacement of effectively three schools with one at Rowdeford would reduce travel times.

It has been a constant throughout my 18 years as a Member of Parliament that transport is the overwhelming preoccupation of parents with children at special needs schools. It is difficult for many of us who do not have direct contact with children with special education needs to understand how important it is. For the parents of a mainstream schoolchild, getting their child to school may be difficult, but for the parents of a child with special educational needs, it can be a preoccupation. It can be the cause of anxiety, distress and behavioural difficulties, and it can be the key focus of the parents’ day. Sometimes we forget how vital it is to ensure that the impact of travel-to-school times is minimised in order to enhance the quality of these young people’s school experience. That is why the council needs to
think again about the plan to replace the three schools with one school, as it seems intuitive that that will increase the trauma that travel to school causes.

The council has made great play of getting more therapists into the proposed new school, and it is right to want to improve the level of service for children in school, but it is not clear how that will happen, since the principal difficulty with therapists right now, as I am sure my hon. Friends will agree, is a county-wide shortage of suitably trained staff. How will the council magic up physios, occupational therapists, and speech and language specialists at the new establishment when it cannot at existing schools? To what extent has it taken into account the disincentive introduced by increased travel-to-work times for them? As a rule, therapists are not wealthy people. They tend not to live in premium price market towns such as Devizes and associated villages. They do live in larger settlements such as Trowbridge and Chippenham.

Local campaigners have produced a helpful map to evidence precisely that. Wiltshire Council is rightly concerned about the number of SEN out-of-county placements and the cost, but it is not clear that the new mega-school will help. By the council’s own figures, it will be inadequate to satisfy demand. The council has not published evidence that it has consulted with other local authorities to see whether a model based on collaboration might be possible given that the administrative borders hold very little interest for a mum or dad trying to get their child to school.

In many ways, Wiltshire Council has been showing the way. It has grasped the 2014 Act imaginatively and worked on its version of the local offer, from birth to 25, all the way to placement in the community. I applaud it for that—I really do—but I also believe that it has temporarily lost its sense of direction. Its plans to close Larkrise School and for a new super-school are plain wrong. Its action and its conduct in this matter is wholly out of character. I expect the council to respond to the consultation fully and openly—

Dr Murrison: I expect the council to respond to the consultation fully and openly, and I expect it to be prepared to change course in accordance with the intent and the ethos of the 2014 legislation.

I extend an invitation to the Minister to visit Wiltshire to see the good work that has been done and to better understand the SEN vision of service users, their families, and staff. I invite him, furthermore, to visit Larkrise School—a good school, according to Ofsted—and to view the council-owned site next door on Ashton Street that is the very obvious place to spend some of the £20 million to expand provision in Wiltshire. I hope that he will apply his good offices to assist the council in matching its very good intentions with a plan that genuinely improves the lives of the vulnerable young people I have the very great privilege to represent.

7.1 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) on securing this important debate. He has spoken eloquently and passionately about Larkrise School and about special educational needs and disability—SEND—provision in Wiltshire. I also commend my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), who is unable to speak on behalf of St Nicholas School in her constituency because she is a member of the Government.

As my hon. Friend said, Wiltshire is a county that has done much of which it can be proud, and there is significant evidence for this. In early 2018, Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission conducted a local area inspection of Wiltshire’s SEND provision. The report of that inspection, published in March that year, stated that the senior leaders were working together constructively to deliver and improve services and demonstrated ambition to deliver high-quality outcomes.

Local authorities such as Wiltshire County Council are critical in ensuring that the SEND reforms succeed. In this respect, as my hon. Friend said, Wiltshire is a council that has done much of which it can be proud, and there is significant evidence for this. In early 2018, Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission conducted a local area inspection of Wiltshire’s SEND provision. The report of that inspection, published in March that year, stated that the senior leaders were working together constructively to deliver and improve services and demonstrated ambition to deliver high-quality outcomes.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) for reminding us of the great work that Wiltshire has done. Other strengths identified in the report included effective joint commissioning arrangements, children achieving well in early years, the local area’s website for the local offer providing a wealth of information and guidance, and safeguarding being a priority for the council, where concerns are swiftly acted upon.

The latest figures from January 2018 show that 3% of pupils attending schools in Wiltshire had an education, health and care plan or a statement of special educational needs, which is just above the national average of 2.9%. In the latest figures available, from 2017, Wiltshire’s performance on issuing education, health and care plans by the statutory deadline of 20 weeks was 91.8%, which
is well above the national average of 64.9%. In 2017, the number of appeals to the SEND tribunal was 0.8% of appealable decisions, which is much lower than the national average of 1.5%.

Wiltshire is doing excellent work on engaging with local parents in strategic decision making in relation to special educational needs and disabilities. Working with families in that way is a central theme of the SEND reforms that we introduced. By the end of its 10th year, in March 2018, the Wiltshire Parent Carer Council reported that it had grown its membership to 2,448 parents. Sixteen parent carer representatives sit on strategic boards and are involved in tasks groups across health, social care and education. Both the local authority and the local health authority provide funding to support the WPCC, on top of the £15,000 per year that the Government provide.

I had the pleasure of meeting representatives from Wiltshire Council and the Wiltshire Parent Carer Council in October last year. They demonstrated a number of things that they were doing in co-production to improve SEND arrangements in the local area. For example, they told me that a new short breaks scheme designed by parents led to increased take-up from families of this important service. Fewer than 100 families were accessing short breaks schemes in Wiltshire before 2008, and that has risen to more than 1,500 families over the years. Importantly, over 98% of those families said that they were happy with the short breaks they accessed.

All this is evidence of a council that is embracing the SEND reforms and making a success of them. Like many other councils, Wiltshire faces significant challenges, but it is clearly making considerable efforts to overcome them. This strong track record is very much to Wiltshire’s credit, as my hon. Friends have pointed out, and I am sure it is appreciated by local families.

Local authorities have a duty to ensure that there is sufficient provision in their area to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND. I am aware of the council’s proposals published for consultation in November 2018 to close two schools for children with complex needs and disabilities and create a single so-called super-special school. That proposal has been challenged locally, and I understand that the grounds of challenge include failure to properly consult before publishing a notice of closure, breach of public sector equality duties, breach of statutory provisions for the welfare of children and appearance of predetermination. I note the concern that if the change proposed by the local authority is implemented, it could have implications for some children who may need to travel further to school. That point has been made forcefully to me by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire tonight and by my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham, on behalf of children in her constituency. I must, however, be clear tonight that I cannot intervene in or comment on this decision; this must be left up to the courts and the local authority.

We recognise that local authorities, including Wiltshire County Council, are facing high needs cost pressures. In response to these pressures, we have allocated an additional £250 million of funding for high needs over this year and next year—I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire for commending us for this further funding—and this is of course on top of the increases we had already promised. Wiltshire will receive £2.3 million of this additional funding.

Of course, our response to these pressures cannot simply be additional funding. That is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State wrote in December to local authority chief executives and directors of children’s services to set out our plans. These plans include reviewing current special educational needs content in initial teacher training provision and ensuring a sufficient supply of educational psychologists trained and working within the system.

We will shortly be issuing a call for evidence on the financial incentives within the current arrangements, in particular on the operation and use of mainstream schools’ notional special educational needs budgets up to £6,000. We of course want to continue to engage with local authorities, along with schools, colleges, parents and health professionals, to ensure that children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities get the support they need and deserve.

I am enormously grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire for raising this important issue. I am particularly grateful to be able to offer praise to a local area through the work not only of the local council and other statutory authorities, but of local families and the voluntary and community sector organisations that make such an important and positive difference to the lives of children and young people with SEND and to their families and friends. The collective efforts they are making to implement these important reforms will have a lasting and positive impact on families locally.

I am pleased to see that, while there is clearly still much to be done, many other areas across the country are also making strong positive efforts, and they are to be applauded. The Government will continue to play our part in supporting all local areas to succeed. I hope that my hon. Friend is content that the Government understand the issues he has raised in this debate.

Question put and agreed to.

7.11 pm

House adjourned.
Deferred Divisions

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS)

That the draft Transparency of Securities Financing Transactions and of Reuse (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 28 January, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 303, Noes 250.

Division No. 348]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Atriyile, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Archer, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Sir Pat
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Sir Graham
Barker, Sir John
Bartley, Bill
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowyer, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, Sir Patrick
Braverman, Sir Emma
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brookshire, Sir James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Cairns, Sir Alun
Campbell, Sir Greg
Carter, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, Sir Greg
Clarke, Sir Mark
Clarke, Mr Simon
Clewer, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Crabb, Sir Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, Sir Nigel
Donaldson, Sir Jeffrey M.
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Dray, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evennett, Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Sir Michael
Field, Sir Frank
Field, Sir Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, Dr David
Francois, Mr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Frey, Mike
Garner, Mark
Gauge, Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nazrul
Gibb, Sir Nick
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, Mr Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, Dr Chris
Green, Chris
Green, Sir Nigel
Greening, Justine
Grieve, Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Guy, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Hall, Sir Stephen
Hammond, Mr Philip
Hancock, rh Matt
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, Sir Nick
Hermon, Lady
Hinds,IFICATION OF REUSE (AMENDMENT) (EU EXIT) REGULATIONS 2019, WHICH WERE LAID BEFORE THIS HOUSE ON 28 JANUARY, BE APPROVED.
 Were laid before this House on 28 January, be approved.

The House divided:

Ayes: 303
Noes: 250

Division No. 348]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Atriyile, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Archer, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Sir Pat
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Sir Graham
Barker, Sir John
Bartley, Bill
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowyer, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, Sir Patrick
Braverman, Sir Emma
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brookshire, Sir James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Cairns, Sir Alun
Campbell, Sir Greg
Carter, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, Sir Greg
Clarke, Sir Mark
Clarke, Mr Simon
Clewer, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Crabb, Sir Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, Sir Nigel
Donaldson, Sir Jeffrey M.
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Dray, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evennett, Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Sir Michael
Field, Sir Frank
Field, Sir Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, Dr David
Francois, Mr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Frey, Mike
Garner, Mark
Gauge, Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nazrul
Gibb, Sir Nick
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, Mr Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, Dr Chris
Green, Chris
Green, Sir Nigel
Greening, Justine
Grieve, Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Guy, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Hall, Sir Stephen
Hammond, Mr Philip
Hancock, rh Matt
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, Sir Nick
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, rr
Hoare, Simon
Hoey, Kate
Hollingbery, George
Hollinsrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Sir Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Saajid
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkins, Andrea
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Graham
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Philipp
Lelfroy, Jeremy
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McFarland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Oford, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philip, Chris
Pitcher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, rh Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Somers, rh Sir Nicholas
Spleman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Berger, Luciana  
Benn, Hilary  
Beckett, Margaret  
Barron, Sir Kevin  
Thomas, Derek  
Thompson, Ross  
Tolhurst, Kelly  
Tomlinson, Justin  
Tomlinson, Michael  
Tracey, Craig  
Tredinnick, David  
Trevelyan, Anne-Marie  
Truss, Elizabeth  
Twigg, Derek  
Umunna, Chuka  
Onn, Melanie  
Onwurah, Chi  
Osamor, Kate  
Owen, Albert  
Pennycook, Matthew  
Perkins, Toby  
Phillips, Jess  
Phillipson, Bridget  
Platt, Jo  
Pollard, Luke  
Powell, Lucy  
Qureshi, Yasmin  
Rashid, Faisal  
Rayner, Angela  
Reeves, Ellie  
Reeves, Rachel  
Reynolds, Emma  
Reynolds, Jonathan  
Rimmer, Ms Marie  
Rowley, Danielle  
Ruane, Chris  
Ryan, Jonathan  
Saville Roberts, Liz  
Shah, Naz  
Sharma, Mr Virendra  
Sheerman, Mr Barry  
Sheppard, Tommy  
Sherriff, Paula  
Shuker, Mr Gavin  
Siddiq, Tulip  
Skinner, Mr Dennis  
Slaughter, Andy  
Smeeth, Ruth  
Smith, Bat  
Smith, Eleanor  
Smith, Jeff  
Smith, Laura  
Smith, Owen  
Smyth, Karin  
Starmer, rh Keir  
Stephens, Chris  
Stevens, Jo  
Streeting, Wes  
Stringer, Graham  
Sweeney, Mr Paul  
Tami, rh Mark  
Thewliss, Alison  
Thomas, Gareth  
Thornberry, rh Emily  
Timms, rh Stephen  
Trickett, Jon  
Turner, Karl  
Twigg, Derek  
Twigg, Stephen  
Twist, Liz  
Umunna, Chuka  
Vaz, rh Keith  
Vaz, Valerie

Abrahams, Debbie  
Ali, Rushanara  
Allen, Heidi  
Amesbury, Mike  
Antoniazzi, Tonia  
Ashworth, Jonathan  
Austin, Ian  
Bailey, Mr Adrian  
Bardell, Hannah  
Barron, rh Sir Kevin  
Beckett, rh Margaret  
Benn, rh Hilary  
Berger, Luciana (Proxy vote cast by Chris Leslie)  
Betts, Mr Clive  
Black, Mhairi  
Blackford, rh Ian  
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta  
Blomfield, Paul  
Brabin, Tracy  
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben  
Brennan, Kevin  
Brock, Deidre  
Brown, Alan  
Brown, Lyn  
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas  
Bryan, Chris  
Buck, Ms Karen  
Burden, Richard  
Burgon, Richard  
Butler, Dawn  
Byrne, rh Liam  
Cadbury, Ruth  
Campbell, rh Sir Alan  
Campbell, Mr Ronnie  
Carden, Dan  
Champion, Sarah  
Chapman, Douglas  
Charalambous, Bambos  
Cherry, Joanna  
Clwyd, rh Ann  
Coaker, Vernon  
Coffey, Ann  
Cooper, Julie  
Cooper, rh Yvette  
Corbyn, rh Jeremy  
Cowan, Ronnie  
Coyle, Neil  
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward  
Vara, Mr Shailesh  
Vickers, Martin  
Villiers, rh Theresa  
Walker, Mr Charles  
Walker, Mr Robin  
Warburton, David  
Warman, Matt  
Wating, Giles  
Whately, Helen  
Wheller, Mrs Heather  
Whittaker, Craig  
Whittingdale, rh Mr John  
Wiggin, Bill  
Williamson, rh Gavin  
Wilson, rh Sammy  
Wood, Mike  
Wragg, Mr William  
Wright, rh Jeremy  
Zahawi, Nadhim  
Crausby, Sir David  
Creasy, Stella  
Cruddas, Jon  
Cunningham, Alex  
Cunningham, Mr Jim  
Daby, Janet  
David, Wayne  
Davies, Geraint  
Day, Martyn  
De Cordova, Marsha  
De Piero, Gloria  
Debonaire, Thangam  
Dent Coad, Emma  
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh  
Dodds, Anneliese  
Doughty, Stephen  
Dowd, Peter  
Drew, Dr David  
Dromey, Jack  
Duffield, Rosie  
Eagle, Ms Angela  
Eagle, Maria  
Elford, Clive  
Elliot, Julie  
Ellman, Dame Louise  
Elmore, Chris  
Esterson, Bill  
Evans, Chris  
Farrelly, Paul  
Fellowes, Marion  
Fitzpatrick, Jim  
Fletcher, Colleen  
Flint, rh Caroline  
Foxvargue, Yvonne  
Foxcroft, Vicky  
Furniss, Gill  
Gaffney, Hugh  
Gapes, Mike  
Gardiner, Barry  
George, Ruth  
Gethins, Stephen  
Gibson, Patricia  
Gill, Preet Kaur  
Glindon, Mary  
Godsiff, Mr Roger  
Goodman, Helen  
Grady, Patrick  
Grant, Peter  
Green, Kate  
Greenwood, Lilian  
Greenwood, Margaret  
Griffith, Nia  
Grogan, John  
Gwynne, Andrew  
Haigh, Louise  
Hamilton, Fabian  
Hanson, rh David  
Harman, rh Ms Harriet  
Hayes, Helen  
Healey, rh John  
Hendry, Drew  
Heppburn, Mr Stephen  
Hill, Mike  
Hiller, Meg  
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
Hollem, Kate  
Hopkins, Kelvin  
Hosie, Stewart  
Huq, Dr Rupa  
Hussain, Imran  
Jarvis, Dan  
Johnson, Diana  
Jones, Darren  
Jones, Gerald  
Jones, Graham P.  
Jones, rh Mr Kevan  
Jones, Susan Elan  
Kane, Mike  
Keely, Barbara  
Kendall, Liz  
Khan, Afzal  
Killen, Ged  
Kinnock, Stephen  
Kyle, Peter  
Lake, Ben  
Lavery, Ian  
Lee, Karen  
Leslie, Mr Chris  
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma  
Lewis, Mr Ivan  
Lloyd, Tony  
Long Bailey, Rebecca  
Lucas, Caroline  
Lucas, Ian C.  
Lynch, Holly (Proxy vote cast by Mark Tami)  
MacNeil, Angus Brendan  
Madders, Justin  
Mahwood, Mr Khalid  
Malhotra, Seema  
Mann, John  
Martin, Sandy  
Maskell, Rachael  
Matheson, Christian  
McCabe, Steve  
McCarthy, Kerry  
McDonald, Sibohain  
McDonald, Andy  
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm  
McDonald, Stuart C.  
McDonnell, rh John  
McFadden, rh Mr Pat  
McGinn, Conor  
McGovern, Alison  
McInnes, Liz  
McKinnell, Catherine  
McMahon, Jim  
McMorrin, Anna  
Mearns, Ian  
Miliband, rh Edward  
Monaghan, Carol  
Moon, Mrs Madeleine  
Morden, Jessica  
Morgan, Stephen  
Morris, Grahame  
Murray, Ian  
Nandy, Lisa  
Newlands, Gavin  
Norris, Alex  
O’Hara, Brendan  
Onn, Melanie  
Osman, Kate  
Owen, Albert  
Peacock, Stephanie  
Pearce, Teresa  
Pennycook, Matthew  
Perkins, Toby  
Phillips, Jess  
Phillipson, Bridget  
Platt, Jo  
Pollard, Luke  
Powell, Lucy  
Qureshi, Yasmin  
Rashid, Faisal  
Rayner, Angela  
Reeves, Ellis  
Reeves, Rachel  
Reynolds, Emma  
Reynolds, Jonathan  
Rimmer, Ms Marie  
Rodda, Matt  
Rowley, Danielle  
Ruane, Chris  
Ryan, Jonathan  
Saville Roberts, Liz  
Shah, Naz  
Sharma, Mr Virendra  
Sheerman, Mr Barry  
Sheppard, Tommy  
Sherriff, Paula  
Shuker, Mr Gavin  
Siddiq, Tulip (Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft)  
Skinner, Mr Dennis  
Slaughter, Andy  
Smeeth, Ruth  
Smith, Bat  
Smith, Eleanor  
Smith, Jeff  
Smith, Laura  
Smith, Owen  
Smyth, Karin  
Starmer, rh Keir  
Stephens, Chris  
Stevens, Jo  
Streeting, Wes  
Stringer, Graham  
Sweeney, Mr Paul  
Tami, rh Mark  
Thewliss, Alison  
Thomas, Gareth  
Thornberry, rh Emily  
Timms, rh Stephen  
Trickett, Jon  
Turner, Karl  
Twigg, Derek  
Twigg, Stephen  
Twist, Liz  
Umunna, Chuka  
Vaz, rh Keith  
Vaz, Valerie
Question accordingly agreed to.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ELECTRICITY)

That the draft Electricity and Gas (Market Integrity and Transparency) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 30 January, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 302, Noes 44.

Division No. 349]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Sir Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Sir Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Sir Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowen, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Braverman, Suella
Breereton, Jack
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Caims, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caudfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Sir Simon
Cleverty, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hoey, Kate
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holloboile, rh Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Liddington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Melcafe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Millng, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milan, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Oford, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Perry, rh Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, rh Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Deferred Divisions 6 MARCH 2019 Deferred Divisions

Sharma, Alok
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, lain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturby, Julian
Suank, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Sym, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Walling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Braverman, Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverty, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davies, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djungley, Mr Jonathan
Dochezty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Dudbridge, James
Duggid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evenden, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Frank
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Garner, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Heron, Lady
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hoey, Kate
Hollingsbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Hudson, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema

Question accordingly agreed to.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (GAS)
That the draft Gas (Security of Supply and Network Codes) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 30 January, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 300, Noes 44.

Division No. 350]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto

Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Braverman, Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverty, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davies, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djungley, Mr Jonathan
Dochezty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Dudbridge, James
Duggid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evenden, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Frank
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky

Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Garner, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Heron, Lady
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hoey, Kate
Hollingsbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Hudson, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
The House divided: Ayes 303, Noes 44.

Division No. 351

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Breerton, Jack
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor

NOES

Hobhouse, Wera
Hosie, Stewart
Jardine, Christine
Lake, Ben
Lucas, Caroline
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
Monaghan, Carol
Moran, Layla
Murray, Ian
Newlands, Gavin
O’Hara, Brendan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Stephens, Chris
Swinson, Jo
Thewliss, Alison
Trickett, Jon
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Wishart, Pete

The draft Nutrition (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 30 January, be approved.

Exiting the European Union (Food)

The draft Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 30 January, be approved.

The draft Environment (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 30 January, be approved.

Exit of the European Union (Food)

The draft Trade (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 30 January, be approved.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Deferred Divisions Deferred Divisions
Deferred Divisions

6 MARCH 2019

Deferred Divisions

Dundridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evennett, Mr Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Mr Sir Michael
Field, Mr Frank
Field, Mr Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, Mr Dr Liam
Francois, Mr Alan
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, Mr David
Ghani, Mr Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, Mr Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grady, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, Chris
Green, Chris
Green, Mrs Benjamin
Grenning, Mr Justine
Grieve, Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, Mr Matt
Harper, Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, Mr Sir John
Head, Mr Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, Mr Nick
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, Mr Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hoey, Kate
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, Mr Sajid
Jennifer, Sir Stephen
Jenny, Mr Andrew
Jennkyn, Robert
Johnson, Mr Boris
Johnson, Mr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, Mr Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, Mr Mark
Leadsom, Mr Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Mr Sir Edward
Letwin, Mr Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, Mr Brandon
Lewis, Mr Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Liddington, Mr David
Little, Pengersley
Logrest, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Mann, Mr Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, Mr Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, Mr Ms Esther
Menzie, Mark
Merce, Mr Johnny
Menrinan, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, Mr Mrs Maria
Millington, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, Mr Anne
Mitchell, Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Mr Penny
Morgan, Mr Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, Mr David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murray, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Mr Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Mr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Paterson, Mr Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, Mr Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Mr Claire
Philip, Sir Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Purseglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, William
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, Mr John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Lawrence
Robinson, Mr Gavin
Robinson, Mr Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Mr Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, Mr Amber
Rutley, Mr David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Mr Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, Mr Grant
Sharma, Mr Alok
Simpson, Mr David
Simpson, Mr Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Mr Chloe
Smith, Mr Henry
Smith, Mr Julian
Smith, Mr Royston
Soames, Mr Sir Nicholas
Spelman, Mr Dame Caroline
Spero, Mr Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Mr Ian
Stewart, Mr Toby
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mr Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Mr Julian
Sunak, Mr Rishi
Swayne, Mr Sir Desmond
Swire, Mr Sir Hugo
Sym, Mr Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Mr Ross
Throup, Mr Maggie
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Mr Michael
Tracey, Mr Craig
Treddinick, Mr David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, Mr Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Mr Tom
Vyse, Mr Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shashi
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, Mr Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Warburton, Mr David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Mr Giles
Wheatley, Mr Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, Mr Mr John
Wiggin, Mr Bill
Williamson, Mr Gavin
Wilson, Mr Sammy
Wood, Mr Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, Mr Jeremy
Zahawi, Mr Nadhim

NOES

Hobhouse, Mr Wera
Hosie, Stewart
Jardine, Mr Christine
Lake, Mr Ben
Lucas, Mr Caroline
MacNeil, Mr Angus
McDonald, Mr Stewart
McDonald, Mr Stuart C.
Monaghan, Carol
Moran, Layla
Murray, Ian
Newlands, Mr Gavin
O’Hara, Brendan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Stephens, Chris
Swinson, Jo
Thewlis, Alison
Trickett, Jon
Whitford, Dr Philip
Wishart, Mr Pete

Question accordingly agreed to.
Deferred Divisions

6 MARCH 2019

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION
(ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS)

That the draft Mobile Roaming (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 4 February, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 301, Noes 257.

Division No. 352]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Henriett
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Breerley, Jack
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glynn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyie-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Frank
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Fraser, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Garnier, Mark
Gauge, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hoey, Kate
Hollingsbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, rh Sir Marcus
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryl
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Oford, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Phillip, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pon, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Roberts, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, rh Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Akok
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Rhys
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swain, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Symes, Sir Robert
Deferred Divisions

Wednesday 6 March 2019

1083

 Deferred Divisions

1084

Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shaisle
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whitaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Hanson, rh David
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendy, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollem, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Hq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Kilien, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lake, Ben
Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Leisure, rh Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, rh Mr Ivan
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly (Proxy vote cast by Chris Leslie)
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhan
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Milliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian

Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O’Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamar, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruan, Chris
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip (Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft)
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeth, Ruth
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Swinson, Jo
Tami, rh Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twig, Derek
Twig, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umnuna, Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan

Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Heidi
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, rh Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana (Proxy vote cast by Chris Leslie)
Betts, rh Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bravshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Ciwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowen, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crasby, rh Sir David
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, rh Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Dutton, Elizabeth
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Elman, Dame Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, rh Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Deferred Divisions 6 MARCH 2019 Deferred Divisions

Wilson, Phil
Williams, Dr Paul
Whitfield, Martin
Whittord, Dr Philippa

Question accordingly agreed to.

EXTENDING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ROAD TRAFFIC)

That the draft Motor Vehicles (Compulsory Insurance) (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 24 January, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 301, Noes 251.

That the draft Motor Vehicles (Compulsory Insurance)

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Colley, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Crabb, rh Stephen

Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Hair, Kirstene
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hoey, Kate
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Liddington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackniay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Mann, Scott

Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryl
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Perry, rh Claire
Philip, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, rh Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
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Question accordingly agreed to.
The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport was asked—

Social Media Platforms: Harmful Content

1. **Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): What steps he is taking to help ensure that social media platforms remove harmful online content. [909637]

2. **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): What steps he is taking to tackle harmful online behaviour. [909649]

**The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright):** More needs to be done to tackle harmful online content and to make it clear that social media platforms have responsibilities to their users. Our forthcoming White Paper will set out those responsibilities, how they should be met and what should happen if they are not.

**Drew Hendry:** On this issue, the Health Secretary said in January:

“It would be far better to do it in concert with the social media companies, but if we think...that they’re refusing to do so, then we can and we must legislate.”

What legislation is the Culture Secretary planning, and will he confirm whether this includes plans for an independent social media regulator?

**Jeremy Wright:** I agree with the Health Secretary, and I have made it clear on a number of occasions that I believe the era of self-regulation must come to an end in this space. But the hon. Gentleman will understand that this is not just a complex matter, but a subject on which it is important to put forward our proposals in the round. We will do that in the White Paper that he will see shortly, and in that he will see what proposals we make for further legislation.

**Vicky Ford:** The Select Committee on Science and Technology heard chilling evidence about the impact that social media can have on young people’s mental health. Does the Secretary of State agree with the Committee’s recommendation that social media companies should have a duty of care towards young people, and if so, how does he intend to legislate for it and by when? If he does not agree, what other route does he suggest taking?

**Jeremy Wright:** The Science and Technology Committee report to which my hon. Friend refers makes an important and worthwhile contribution to this debate, and I am grateful to her and her colleagues for it. Again, I hope she will forgive me if I do not set out at this Dispatch Box now precisely what the White Paper will say, but perhaps I can reassure her by saying that we are strongly considering a duty of care as part of the proposals we seek to make, and we believe it is important that responsibilities are taken seriously to protect not only young people but everyone from the harms that the internet may provide.

**Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): The Secretary of State mentions the duty of care applying to platforms. Is he aware that there are gaming platforms similar to social media platforms which are circulating material such as the rather horribly named “Rape Day” game, and will he extend any legislation he is planning for social media to game platforms?

**Jeremy Wright:** I believe it is not what a company calls itself that matters, but what it does. What we will seek to do in the White Paper and anything that follows it is make sure that we can tackle the harms we define as in scope of that White Paper, wherever they may lie on the internet. I understand that the game the hon. Lady mentions has now been withdrawn; quite right too—I think all of us would have been horrified had any other course been taken.

**Damian Collins** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree with the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee report that if social media platforms host harmful content and will he extend any legislation he is planning for social media platforms to game platforms?

**Jeremy Wright:** Again, my hon. Friend will have to wait for the detail of the White Paper, but I have made it. I hope, very clear, and am happy to make it clear again, that I believe that social media companies have responsibilities in this space. They should take those responsibilities seriously, and if they do not there should be consequences.

**Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): Following on from the question from the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) from the Labour Benches about “Rape Day”, the game was created by developer Desk Plant. For the benefit of the Secretary of State, those in the Chamber and those watching, I should say that the game enables players to “verbally harass, kill, and rape women”, and its contents include “violence, sexual assault, non-consensual sex, obscene language, necrophilia, and incest.”

A game of this nature has no place in our society. I am glad it has been pulled by gaming site Steam, but its statement was woeful; it did not even accept or acknowledge the risk that it could pose. At a time when one in five women will experience sexual violence in their lives, and in the week when International Women’s Day falls, will
think, free of intimidation and free of the threat of violence. Those who engage in intimidation or threats of violence should not find succour online or anywhere else.

**Rural Broadband**

2. **David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve access to broadband in rural areas.

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): The Government have invested £1.8 billion of public money to ensure that 95% of the country has access to superfast broadband. Broadband UK operates voucher schemes, and the Government are introducing a universal service obligation that will give everybody the right to a minimum speed of 10 megabits per second. These interventions are particularly designed to help people in rural areas.

David Duguid: I thank the Minister for her response. The Scottish National party has been boasting about the £600 million that the Scottish Government have supposedly invested—past tense—in the R100 broadband scheme. That money has not been invested; more than a year and a half after the funding was promised, they have still not got round to awarding the contracts. This so-called investment remains just a promise, and the ambition of 100% superfast access by 2021 is looking less realistic than ever. Can the Minister assure me that when she next meets Scottish Government Ministers, she will remind them of the importance of sticking to their timetable?

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister’s responsibility is for the UK Government’s policy. She has no responsibility for the policy of the Scottish Government—a fact of which I am sure she is fully aware.

Margot James: I am indeed aware of that, Mr Speaker, but it is crucial that Governments stick to timetables when delivering an essential utility that is a fundamental part of public need. I will of course be happy to discuss this when I am next in communication with Scottish Government Ministers, who should be held to account for the unacceptable delay in even getting started on this vital work.

**Ian C. Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): The Government’s shift to fibre investment is very welcome, although the levels of fibre in this country for delivering essential infrastructure are very low. North Wales has put forward an impressive bid to support our strong local economy. Will the Minister look closely at the bid and accelerate investment in fibre?

Margot James: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we need to catch up on fibre. The Government have exciting plans and funding to accelerate fibre roll-out, with a £200 million programme, which was announced in the last Budget, starting this April and a further £300 million before 2022. I will look at the north Wales proposal with great interest.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I thank the Minister most warmly and sincerely for her announcement yesterday of £1.91 million to get superfast broadband into Unst and Yell in Shetland. That money truly has the potential to be transformative for those

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**Oral Answers**

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Jeremy Wright: Yes. The hon. Lady makes a good point, and I think that we should ask questions about this. It is profoundly unacceptable that material such as this should be available to young people, and older people, and we must worry about the sense it creates of proper relationships and the way in which these types of activity should be regarded by any fundamentally decent society. Of course, we must understand exactly how it has got to this point in relation to this game. As I have said, I welcome the fact that the game has been withdrawn. I think we would all have been having a very different conversation this morning if it had not been.

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): Every major social media platform other than YouTube has taken down Stephen Yaxley-Lennon’s profile because of his hateful conduct. Late on Monday night, Yaxley-Lennon turned up at a journalist’s home and banged on the doors and windows demanding to be let in. After being escorted away by the police, he returned at 5 am and continued his intimidation. The incident was live-streamed. He later warned journalists in a YouTube video to expect a “knock on the door”. Does the Secretary of State think it is right that YouTube and its parent company Alphabet are continuing to give this platform?

Jeremy Wright: In this House, we all believe in freedom of speech, but we also believe that that freedom of speech has limits, and that when people seek to intimidate others, and potentially to break the law—the description that the hon. Gentleman has given the House this morning is potentially a description of criminal behaviour—it is unacceptable. It is beyond the reach of the type of freedom of speech that we believe should be taken seriously, and I hope that YouTube will consider carefully what the hon. Gentleman and I have said, and reconsider its judgment.

Tom Watson: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. Those who have expressed their opinion online will know that doing so can unleash a torrent of abuse designed to make them wonder whether they should speak out at all. This week we have heard of female colleagues having panic buttons installed in their homes because of the death and rape threats they have received. This culture of abuse, intimidation and threats undermines our democracy and the principles of free speech. Will the Secretary of State consider, and even guarantee, that the online harms White Paper will introduce measures to prevent hate figures, extremists and their followers from turning the online world into a cesspit of hate?

Jeremy Wright: I will of course consider what the hon. Gentleman has said, but we must ensure that we preserve our ability, online as everywhere else, to debate and discuss issues that are sometimes uncomfortable and certainly controversial. I repeat, however, that no freedom of speech can survive in this country if we do not protect people’s ability to feel free to say what they believe.
communities. If she would like to come and see that for herself, she would be very welcome. If she does so, she will also be able to see the remaining communities in Shetland and Orkney where such investment could make a massive difference.

**Margot James:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his positive input, and I am planning to visit Scotland in April. I draw his attention to the excellent 5G testbed pilots that we are running in rural areas in his part of Scotland.

**Sports Coverage**

1. **Craig Tracey** (North Warwickshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support media coverage of sport played by (a) women and (b) disabled people.

2. **The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright):** Sport is a devolved matter in Scotland, but through Sport England we fund 45 different sporting governing bodies that support grassroots participation and talented athletes. When people watch broadcast sport, they should see women and disabled people, too. Although progress has been made over the last few years, especially in women’s sport, there is scope to do better. I met broadcasters and sporting organisations recently to discuss with them what more they can do.

3. **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What steps his Department is taking to (a) support and (b) increase the broadcasting of minority sports.

4. **Jeremy Wright:** I am very happy to do that, and I wish Megan and the rest of the side the very best of luck. My hon. Friend is a doughty champion of women’s sport. He makes the case, and we hear him. We are also talking about the broadcast of women’s sport, and I know that he will recognise that it is a step forward that the first stand-alone women’s world T20 competition this year will be broadcast on British free-to-air television.

5. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): Thanks to Sky Sports, the women’s Six Nations has received much wider coverage since 2017 than ever before. However, Sky Sports is a subscription channel. Can the Minister tell us whether the conversations he has mentioned extend to conversations with the rugby unions of the home nations and free-to-view channels about getting this competition on a free-to-view channel before the next International Women’s Day?

6. **Jeremy Wright:** We are certainly having conversations with all the broadcasters about what more they can do.

By the way, I should correct myself: I think it is in fact Sky that will be broadcasting the women’s world T20, not a free-to-air broadcaster as I suggested. Sky is doing a good deal, and we welcome that. We hope it will do more. I am having conversations about how we can broaden the scope of women’s sport and disability sport that people see on television so that they can see a variety of different sports, perhaps including in the highlights packages they may see. That is an important way of engaging people with a broader understanding of what is happening in the sporting environment.
Society Lotteries Reform

4. Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): What the timetable is for the Government’s response to the consultation on society lottery reform. [909640]

5. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): When he plans to respond to the consultation on the reform of the regulation of society lotteries. [909641]

12. Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What the timetable is for the Government’s response to the consultation on society lottery reform. [909652]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): I am carefully considering the evidence submitted during the consultation, and I hope to respond in the first half of this year.

Brendan O’Hara: Despite many warm words stretching back over several years, the Government have shown a distinct lack of urgency in considering the future of society lotteries. It has now been six months since the consultation closed and, all the while, charities and good causes are losing desperately needed funds. Will the Minister now confirm that the Government’s preferred option of a £100 million annual sales limit will be applied and implemented, as previously stated, on 6 April? If not, why not?

Mims Davies: I accept the hon. Gentleman’s point that there is a real strength of feeling on this matter. The fact that I am still regularly meeting colleagues and hearing from the sector shows that we want to get this right. I understand the sense of urgency, but I appreciate that we need to get the balance right. Society lotteries are important, and they make a huge contribution to the fundraising landscape, with £296 million raised for good causes last year alone. Of course we need to balance it with any potential impact on the national lottery, too.

Sir Henry Bellingham: In concurring with the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara), does the Minister agree that the request by society lotteries to raise the maximum prize to £1 million is both popular and reasonable, and that there is no evidence this would damage the national lottery? She will be aware that society lotteries do untold good in our constituencies, so will she now stand foursquare behind them?

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and it is right to admit and react to the fact that we consulted on the £1 million prize, but we need to balance it with any potential impact on the national lottery. There is a balance to be made. Society lotteries, as we well know, are widely used as a fundraising tool across our communities to support local charities and hospices. To my mind, if we find this balance, we will grow the pie and help all lotteries to survive.

Deidre Brock: The players of the People’s Postcode lottery, based in my constituency of Edinburgh North and Leith, have raised an amazing £400 million for good causes, but achieving that incredible fundraising milestone has been greatly hindered by this outdated legislation. The Government said last June that a £100 million annual sales limit is their preferred option. Why has that not been implemented? When exactly will they bring forward the legislation to do just that?

Mims Davies: I know that the People’s Postcode lottery does a huge amount in the hon. Lady’s constituency. In fact, it recently brought George Clooney to her constituency to celebrate this success. I am very disappointed not to have been able to accept the invite—can’t think why!

The work of the People’s Postcode lottery has supported our building connections fund, with £11.5 million going to tackle loneliness. It is right that we balance all these great but competing opportunities to support charities across the country.

Free TV Licences: Over-75s

6. Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on free TV licences for people over 75 years of age. [909642]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): I discuss a range of matters with my Cabinet colleagues, and we know that older people across the country value TV as a way to stay connected with the world. That is why we have guaranteed the over-75s licence concession until June 2020, at which point responsibility for it will transfer to the BBC. After that, it will be for the BBC to decide on the future of that concession, but the Government have made it clear that we would want and expect the BBC to continue with it.

Patricia Gibson: A recent report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has shown that one in six of our pensioners are now living in poverty, so the last thing they need is an extra £150.50 added to their bills. I know that the Minister and his Government are keen to shift responsibility for this on to the BBC’s shoulders, but will the Secretary of State accept that having promised in his party’s manifesto that licences for the over-75s would be maintained, he must either fulfil that promise or admit that his party and his Government have let pensioners down?

Jeremy Wright: First, the responsibility has been transferred—that happened by statute in 2017. The deal was done with the BBC in 2015. What we do not yet have are the proposals that the BBC intends to make. My suggestion is that we all wait to see what the BBC actually decides to do, and then we can comment upon it.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The Secretary of State is right: it is in statute. We opposed it, and right now the National Pensioners Convention is protesting outside DCMS—not outside the BBC. That is because this policy was invented by this Government. It is about transferring social policy to the BBC, which should not have happened. Should this not be up for the prize for the most cynical policy this Government have ever created?

Jeremy Wright: No, but what is truly cynical is to criticise the Government for the transfer of a financial liability without any hint whatsoever from Her Majesty’s Opposition that they would be prepared to take it back. So I would be very interested to hear whether it is the
policy of the Labour party, in government, to take this responsibility back into the Government’s hands, and exactly what would be cut, what extra would be borrowed or what taxes would be raised to pay for it. Otherwise, it is just hot air.

Charity Regulation

7. **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help increase public trust in charity regulation. 809646

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): The Charity Commission performs a vital role as the independent regulator and registrar of charities in England and Wales. The National Audit Office conducted a review of the commission as recently as November 2017 and was positive in its findings. The commission continues to regulate robustly to ensure that the public can support charities with confidence.

**Dr Huq:** Some £43 million of public money going on a bridge across the Thames on which zero construction occurred has led us all up the garden path and now we know that the trust is being wound up. The Charity Commission says it will do no further investigation, so will the Government instigate an independent inquiry so that lessons are learned and no project like this ever has the same fate? Frankly, to have a regulator that is not regulating feels useless.

**Mims Davies:** The hon. Lady raises the specific issue of the Garden Bridge Trust, which is concerning. The commission has rightly scrutinised the trustees’ conduct and management, and the charity itself, carefully, and it continues to monitor the charity’s progress on winding up. I understand that the commission intends to publish a concluding report on the running of the trust and to learn those wider lessons, setting them out for policy makers so that we can learn from them. I am happy to hear from the hon. Lady if she has further concerns.

**Mrs Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con): The Minister will be aware that public trust in charities was shaken to the core by the revelations of the sexual abuse and harassment that occurred not only in the UK and Europe but around the world. What work is the Charity Commission doing to make sure that that issue is addressed, and that emerging concerns about the role of overseas orphanages in issues of modern-day slavery are looked into? These are important issues involving charities.

**Mims Davies:** I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this issue; she is a doughty campaigner for women around the world and it is absolutely right that we will have the debate later today ahead of International Women’s Day tomorrow. People have been horrified by what has been allowed to be done around the globe under the watch of charities, and it is absolutely right that we learn lessons. I am due to talk to Ministers from the Department for International Development about this matter, and I would be happy to speak to my right hon. Friend about particular issues if she feels that anything has not been picked up on. We must make sure that we learn further lessons. Nothing can be left alone on this issue.

**Mr Steve Reed** (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): I want to press the Minister further on the garden bridge issue. It has been a total fiasco. We have seen £40 million of public money wasted; public tendering and procurement processes bypassed; contracts awarded before the business case was even drawn up; and a cosy relationship—to say the least—between the chair of the trustees and senior figures at the Charity Commission itself, as well as the former Mayor of London. How can the public have trust in charity regulation if the Charity Commission will not properly investigate a scandal of this magnitude? What is the Minister going to do herself to make sure that a full investigation—not just a report—into this scandal is conducted?

**Mims Davies:** As I said, there has been an investigation and lessons will be learned. I am due to meet the Charity Commission fairly shortly. The Government increased the commission’s budget by £5 million in January 2018 so that it could increase its core regulatory functions. I admit that I have had issues in my own constituency relating to concerns about the Charity Commission, so I am happy to take the matter further. I am the charities and lotteries Minister and, as we heard earlier, if we do not have confidence in our charities’ ability to make sure that they look after other people’s money properly, we need to carry on and do more.

Mobile Phone Coverage

8. **Norman Lamb** (North Norfolk) (LD): What steps his Department is taking to improve mobile phone coverage throughout the UK. 809647

**The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries** (Margot James): Our ambition is to have good mobile coverage where people live, work and travel. I welcome the coverage obligations that Ofcom recently proposed ahead of the 700 MHz and 3.6 GHz to 3.8 GHz spectrum auctions. We have reformed the electronic communications code and made changes to planning laws, all to encourage the roll-out of digital infrastructure by making deployment cheaper.

**Norman Lamb:** People living in part of North Walsham in my constituency have been waiting years for any signal at all. They thought their wait was over when a mast was erected in November 2017 but, despite constant pressure on BT Openreach, it still has not been connected. Openreach needs to lay cables across land owned by Anglian Water. Should we not be able to compel these monopolies to provide a service to local people?

**Margot James:** The right hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. We are looking to improve and strengthen the requirements on landowners to allow access to their land for vital infrastructure.

Leaving the EU: Tourism

9. **Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to help ensure the UK remains an attractive tourist destination after the UK leaves the EU. 809648

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport** (Michael Ellis): The UK has a thriving tourism landscape. Both 2016 and 2017 showed
all-time record numbers of visitors and spend, and we want that to continue. The UK and EU have proposed reciprocal visa-free travel for tourism, and the use of e-passport gates will be expanded to seven countries this summer. An additional 6.5 million passengers per year will benefit.

Stephen Crabb: The B&Bs and caravan parks in Pembrokeshire are looking forward to another good season, but the concern I hear time and again is that poor broadband and mobile phone signals are a real hindrance. In 2019, who wants to go on holiday to a place that does not have a decent signal? Does the Minister agree that these 21st-century essentials are vital for a healthy tourism industry?

Michael Ellis: They are vital. Everyone wants to go on holiday in Pembrokeshire. We need broadband to work well. The Government have allocated £66 million to Welsh regions to support the roll-out of superfast broadband, and we will continue to work in partnership with the Welsh Government to support that roll-out. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to promote Pembrokeshire’s wonderful assets, including its beaches and tourism vista.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Minister aware that Huddersfield has more listed buildings that either Bath or York? Does he also realise that we have just launched as the first gigabit town, which gives us superfast broadband right through the town and makes us one of the most attractive towns in Britain?

Michael Ellis: The hon. Gentleman is welcome. We are very pleased to have supported his area in the way that we have, and we will continue to do so.

Public Libraries: Northamptonshire

11. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): If he will take steps to prevent the closure of public libraries in Northamptonshire.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): Northamptonshire County Council is responsible for the delivery of a comprehensive and efficient library service. The Department is aware of its plans for changes to the service. Officials have been in regular discussions with it, as I have too.

Mr Hollobone: Against a very challenging financial background, will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating the county council on finally coming up with sensible plans to keep all the libraries open?

Michael Ellis: Yes, I will, and I thank my hon. Friend for his work in this regard over many months. I have been in touch with the council leader and the chief executive. I am pleased to confirm that their plan is not to close any libraries in Northamptonshire. They are working towards that end, and he, I and others in Northamptonshire have worked and lobbied in that regard, but we will continue to monitor the situation carefully.

Gagging Orders: Charities


The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): It is vital that charities feel free to speak on behalf of everyday people and continue to develop the right policy with Government. Government contracts will include provisions to ensure that providers adhere to the high standards that we expect. However, those provisions are in no way gagging clauses.

Emma Dent Coad: In my constituency, we have a large number of charities and advice agencies dealing with the fallout of Government cuts, universal credit, and, of course, the after-effects of Grenfell. Does the Minister truly believe that those frontline organisations should be silenced rather than being able to share their justified concerns, which could then be rectified? I draw particular attention to some of the groups involved in Grenfell that have been told, “Play nice, and you’ll get what you need.” They should be allowed to speak out.

Mims Davies: I reiterate that this is not a gagging clause. I repeated that when I met the charities group in December and spoke at its event here in Westminster, and the Prime Minister wrote to Sir Stuart Etherington and reaffirmed the point. If the hon. Lady wishes to meet me to discuss those who feel that they cannot speak out, I would be very happy to do so. It is absolutely right that we should be able to hear the sector’s voice and to hear its expertise, its insight and everything that it can bring to Government to tackle burning injustices. As I say, I am very happy to meet her to discuss the matter.

Topical Questions

T1. [909655] Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): On the eve of International Women’s Day, I am sure that the whole House will join me in congratulating the England women’s football team on winning the SheBelieves Cup this week. I also congratulate all our outstanding British winners in this year’s Oscars, particularly Olivia Colman for her Best Actress award. We are proud of them all, and they remind us of how sport and culture can unite us.

Peter Heaton-Jones: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. I am a former employee and a huge supporter of our public service broadcaster, but on the issue of TV licences for those over the age of 75, is it not the case that the BBC accepted responsibility for this concession when it made an agreement with the Government? Should it not now deliver that in full, and do so without the threats of cuts to services?

Jeremy Wright: My hon. Friend correctly relays the history of this. As I said earlier, it is right for us to await the conclusions of the BBC’s review of this matter. It is far more sensible to comment on something when we have seen it rather than before we have seen it. Once we have seen it, we will all be able to reach a judgment. It is the Government’s clear expectation that this concession should continue.
Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Will the Sports Minister comment on whether English Football League football fans were consulted on the “fans fare” scheme to protect the fares of away travelling fans?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): My hon. Friends in the Department for Transport have been working strongly with fans to ensure that travel is appropriate. My understanding was that the issue had been dealt with, but I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman if he still feels that there are concerns in this area.

T2. [909659] Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): May I congratulate the entire DCMS team on their truly world-leading work on online harms? On the issue of online abuse specifically, it would appear—certainly in this place—that women are targeted far more than men. Will the Minister confirm whether there is evidence to suggest that this gender bias in online abuse is an issue more broadly?

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): My hon. Friend is quite right. There is a mounting body of evidence that women in public life—in an elected capacity or as journalists—face a disproportionately high level of abuse online compared with men. If we are to protect free speech and open debate, it is vital that our White Paper on online harms addresses all types of abuse, harassment and intimidation online.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): Last week the Government admitted that only a fifth of FTSE 350 boards had a grasp on cyber-security. Only 4% of businesses recalled using any Government sources of information, and there is a growing skills gap of 50,000 specialists. May I politely ask the Government to wake up to their failing strategies and urgently get a grip on the growing cyber threat?

Margot James: I assure the hon. Lady. That number of FTSE 350 companies—which I met representatives of to discuss this subject earlier in the week—prioritising cyber-security is growing. The Government have committed funding, through the cyber-security high impact skills fund, to helping industry close the skills gap.

T3. [909659] Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Equipping our ageing population with new skills is key, especially in areas such as Cornwall, where older people are targeted far more than men. Will the Minister confirm whether there is evidence to suggest that this gender bias in online abuse is an issue more broadly?

Margot James: The Department has just launched the digital inclusion innovation fund, which has been specifically designed to tackle digital exclusion among older and disabled people. A few weeks ago I visited a 5G test bed in the Kensington part of Liverpool, where I saw at first hand how we are harnessing this technology to improve social care and tackle loneliness among older people.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): The Offensive Weapons Bill bans the online sale of offensive weapons to residential addresses, but it has revealed a significant gap in the legislation around the sale of offensive weapons on platforms. Will the Secretary of State address that gap in the upcoming White Paper?

Jeremy Wright: I will look carefully at the issue raised by the hon. Lady. Of course it is important that we closely keep track of where these weapons are being sold and the methods being employed. She would expect me to say that the online harms White Paper will focus on the responsibilities of the online platforms to keep people safe from harm. Harm varies, and we are concerned about a variety of different harms, but we will certainly pay close attention to the point that she has raised.

T4. [909660] Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Ahead of International Women’s Day, we should remember the thousands of women who live with nude and sexually explicit images of themselves posted online without their permission. The current legislation is piecemeal and ripe for reform. Will my right hon. and learned Friend look at amalgamating the legislation to outlaw all forms of image-based abuse and make it easier for such images to be removed quickly?

Jeremy Wright: Yes. My right hon. Friend will be aware of the Law Commission’s work in this area, and we are looking at the issue carefully. May I take this opportunity to pay tribute to her, as she has played a significant part in the development of the law in this area? Whether on upskirting or revenge pornography, she and other Members have done a great deal to put the law in a better place.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Bearing in mind the dwindling pipeline of musical talent coming through from state schools, does the Minister agree with the chair of UK Music that music education should be seen as an intrinsic good, just as sporting education is?

Margot James: I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government take music and other creative arts education very seriously. The Minister for School Standards has very seriously. The Minister for School Standards has made it clear, and cautioned them, that they need to be aware of the Law Commission’s work in this area, and we are looking at the issue carefully. May I take this upon-Tweed) (Con): Will the Minister comment on the recently announced £500,000 campaign by VisitBritain in conjunction with Airbnb? Regulated holiday cottage and bed-and-breakfast owners across north Northumberland spend a lot of money each year meeting licensing, fire and health and safety requirements, whereas Airbnb owners do not have to.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight that issue. Northumberland is, of course, a county that millions want to visit, and should do. I am hoping, in fact, to visit myself; I commend it to everyone. I have addressed the issue of Airbnb with its representatives in person, and I see the Bed and Breakfast Association regularly. In my discussions with Airbnb representatives, I have made it clear, and cautioned them, that they need to
work to satisfy all concerned about health and safety issues, and they assure me that they are doing that. We will continue to monitor the situation.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What discussions has the Minister had with Tourism Ireland to ensure that visitors from the United States of America who come to the Republic of Ireland are encouraged to go to Northern Ireland to enjoy its attractions as well?

Michael Ellis: I am delighted to say that Northern Ireland tourism is doing extremely well with visitors from North America and elsewhere. The Titanic exhibition, for example, is extremely popular and has been winning awards. The “Game of Thrones” television programme also draws people to Northern Ireland. There are myriad reasons to visit—not least, of course, the warm welcome from the people of Northern Ireland. I commend the hon. Gentleman for his question.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Could I draw the Minister’s attention to an initiative that I launched a couple of weeks ago—“Derbyshire, the County of Culture”—to try to bring tourism to Derbyshire and make it a cohesive county? Would he like to comment on that initiative?

Michael Ellis: I commend my hon. Friend for what she does for her county of Derbyshire. I previously referred to her as the prima ballerina assoluta of this House when she asked a question about ballet, and she is absolutely an advocate for her county as well. There is also a major call from across the House for towns of culture, and we are working on and discussing that matter. I will continue to consider her suggestions.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): When are the Government going to crack down on ticket reselling websites? A constituent of mine was scammed by being charged over £600 for tickets that should have cost £130 at the box office. Viagogo refused to take any responsibility even though it facilitated and profited from this rip-off transaction. The Government have to haul these companies into better standards. StubHub, GetMeIn and Seatwave have all complied with the law during discussions with the Competition and Markets Authority. Unfortunately, Viagogo has, for the second time, refused to do so. The CMA announced yesterday that it will be undertaking proceedings for contempt of court against Viagogo. I would urge all Members to make their constituents aware that there are alternatives to Viagogo and that they should use them.

Attorney General

CPS: Serious and Organised Crime

1. Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): What steps the CPS is taking to improve its response to serious and organised crime.

2. Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What steps the CPS is taking to improve its response to serious and organised crime.

3. Neil O’Brien (Harrowborough) (Con): What steps the CPS is taking to improve its response to serious and organised crime.

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): The Crown Prosecution Service has a crucial role in tackling serious and organised crimes such as human trafficking, money laundering and child sexual exploitation. It works with other criminal justice agencies to support the Government’s serious and organised crime strategy.

Leo Docherty: How effectively does the CPS work with other law enforcement agencies to fight serious and organised crime?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to talk about international co-operation. I am happy to remind him of the important network of up to 27 specialist prosecutors who are based abroad and who work closely with other jurisdictions across international boundaries. Recent examples are the successful conviction of Matthew Falder for child sexual exploitation offences and the conviction of Keith Morris for multiple counts of rape and sexual assault against victims in Kenya. I am happy to say that the Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate has reported that the international justice and organised crime division has a conviction rate of over 90% and undertakes high-quality work.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for his answers thus far. One of the most insidious aspects of serious and organised crime is the modern slave trade. What action is he taking to bring those criminals to justice, so that we can smash these rings once and for all?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to draw the House’s attention once again to the grim reality of modern-day slavery. The importance of the CPS in providing early investigative advice in all cases has been underlined, because solely relying on the testimony of victims, who are often vulnerable, can lead to challenges. I am happy to say that in the last year, there was a 119% increase in cases where that vital early advice was provided to the police.

Neil O’Brien: What steps is the CPS taking to better prosecute county lines offending?

The Solicitor General: Rightly, we are hearing a lot of concern about the existence of organised county lines, which are affecting our towns and cities across the country. The CPS has developed a particular approach and typology to help the police and other agencies deal with county lines, concerning in particular the balance between the need to safeguard the vulnerable persons—often young—who are being used and the proper investigation and prosecution of criminal offences.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Solicitor General remember replying to me when I said that it was a great concern for those of us who represent towns where there have been dreadful grooming
gangs that a senior police officer—not in my patch, but another part of the country—said that the under-resourcing of the CPS meant that it was unable to proceed when it found new evidence about perpetrators?

The Solicitor General: I assure the hon. Gentleman, who has long been properly concerned about this serious offending, that resource will not be a barrier to the prosecution of offences. We have seen an important sea change in attitudes to the complainants and victims of child sexual exploitation. Gone, I hope, are the days when young victims are disregarded or ignored by the authorities. The message has to go out that we will listen and act to protect victims.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Does the Solicitor General agree with the Chancellor that, rather than new money being spent, knife crime and serious and organised crime should simply be prioritised? If he does, which area does he think should be de-prioritised?

The Solicitor General: I assure the hon. Lady that it is not a question of choice when it comes to the prosecution of offences. I am happy to say that in the last year, more than 27,500 cases involving possession of a knife or bladed article were commenced in our courts. That is an important testimony to the seriousness with which the prosecuting authorities take the possession and use of knives and offensive weapons.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Can the Solicitor General outline how long it takes for proceeds of serious crime to be administered to communities through the safer communities fund and other grants?

The Solicitor General: I am grateful for the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) will know, the Law Officers have what they need to make an informed decision. We do not feel afraid or concerned about reporting crimes?

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that very full reply. On 29 January, the Attorney General published his review of disclosure, which examined the efficiency and effectiveness of the current system.

CPS: Disclosure Obligations

2. Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the adequacy of the level of CPS resources to comply with its disclosure obligations.

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): I have frequent conversations with ministerial colleagues about this issue and all issues relating to the criminal justice system. In November last year, the Attorney General published his review of disclosure, which examined the efficiency and effectiveness of the current system.

Bambos Charalambous: The disclosure process is a fundamental cornerstone of the criminal justice system. Can the Solicitor General outline his priorities to combat its shortcomings?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman knows that the Attorney General and I, as criminal litigators, have a long and deep interest in this issue. One of the newer challenges has been the rise of technology and the proliferation of telephones and other instruments that have to be examined in many cases. I will chair a digital summit in the months ahead, to try to develop innovative new ways in which we can assist the process.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): What steps is my hon. and learned Friend taking to ensure that victims do not feel afraid or concerned about reporting crimes?

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. She knows, in the context of disclosure, that we must be very careful to strike a balance so that it does not become a box-ticking exercise. In particular, in every case the necessity to seize telephones and other items from victims should be assessed very much on the evidence, rather than as a matter of course. I think we must do everything to make it clear to victims that they will get support and encouragement, rather than feel that the process is working against them in a way that can be just as traumatic as the crime itself.

EU Withdrawal Agreement: Northern Ireland

5. Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the legal implications of the Northern Ireland backstop.

7. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What recent steps he has taken to seek legally binding changes to the Northern Ireland protocol in the EU withdrawal agreement.

The Attorney General (Mr Geoffrey Cox): I regularly meet ministerial colleagues to discuss important issues of common interest, including matters relating to the United Kingdom’s exit from the Union. I am unable, I am afraid, to talk about the legal content of those discussions because, as the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) will know, the Law Officers are bound by the Law Officers’ convention to disclose neither the fact nor the content of that advice.

I remain committed to considering what assistance I personally can provide to this House on the legal implications of the backstop, to ensure that Members have what they need to make an informed decision. We have been engaging in focused, detailed and careful discussions with the Union, and we continue to seek legally binding changes to the backstop that ensure it cannot be indefinite. These discussions will be resumed shortly.

Helen Goodman: I am most grateful to the Attorney General for that very full reply. On 29 January, the Prime Minister told the House:

“What I am talking about is not a further exchange of letters but a significant and legally binding change to the withdrawal agreement...It will involve reopening the withdrawal agreement”.—[Official Report, 29 January 2019; Vol. 653, c. 678.]

Given the response that the Attorney General has had in Brussels and the remarks of the French Minister on the radio this morning, is it still Government policy to seek a reopening of the withdrawal agreement?
The Attorney General: It is Government policy to achieve the necessary change in the backstop that will cause me to review and change my advice. That is Government policy; that is the subject of the discussions that we are having. I would say that it has come to be called “Cox’s codpiece”. What I am concerned to ensure is that what is inside the codpiece is in full working order.

Mr Speaker: Well! I hope everybody heard that. In the interests of the accessibility of our proceedings—in case anybody did not hear it—the right hon. and learned Gentleman referred to Cox’s codpiece. I have repeated it so that the alliterative quality is clear to all observers.

Patrick Grady: Thank you for that breather, Mr Speaker.

They say that the definition of insanity is repeating the same thing and expecting different results. Given that the Attorney General has not and will not be able to change a single word in this withdrawal agreement, how exactly would he describe the Government’s plans to put it to a vote again in this House next week?

The Attorney General: The plans for next week are not mine to decide, but what I can tell the hon. Gentleman is this: we are discussing detailed, coherent, careful proposals, and we are discussing text with the European Union. I am surprised to hear the comments that have emerged over the last 48 hours that the proposals are not clear; they are as clear as day, and we are continuing to discuss them.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Will my right hon. and learned Friend give Parliament 48 hours’ notice or, at any rate, properly full notice of the outcome of his discussions with the EU? Will he provide to Parliament a draft of the withdrawal and implementation Bill, so that my European Scrutiny Committee, and others in Parliament and others outside, can assess how the withdrawal agreement will be enacted in domestic law, as obliged by article 4 of the withdrawal agreement; how the Bill would ensure the statutory manner in which the express repeal of the European Communities Act 1972 will be dealt with; and how the question of disapplication by the courts—by the Supreme Court—will be handled under that enactment?

The Attorney General: We will endeavour to give as much notice as we possibly can. Of course those discussions are running. They will resume very shortly and continue almost certainly through the weekend. We will endeavour to give the House notice as early as we can, if and when we have something to report. My hon. Friend made a second point about the Bill. That is not for me to decide, although I will certainly discuss the matter with those who will make that decision. We will endeavour to give the European Scrutiny Committee, and my hon. Friend, the earliest possible notice.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The Attorney General is now in the interesting position of leading on these negotiations, which means that—to follow his nomenclature—he will end up examining his own codpiece in front of the House of Commons. How can he provide the objective advice to the House on which we rely when he will, in effect, be marking his own homework?

The Attorney General: The law is the law. The question of whether whatever is negotiated with the European Union affects the legal risk of the indefinite duration of the backstop is a matter that I shall judge entirely impartially and objectively. If I did not, I would be conscious that there are many lawyers—

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Too many.

The Attorney General: The hon. Gentleman may be right. There are many lawyers who are eminently capable of deciding whether I have got my judgment right or wrong.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Article 175 of the withdrawal agreement which, as the Attorney General knows, deals with resolving disputes about the interpretation of the agreement, states that rulings of the arbitration panel shall be binding on the EU and the UK. In his letter to the Prime Minister of 13 November, the Attorney General stated that although the withdrawal agreement does not “expressly state” that the backstop review mechanism “is intended to be arbitrable... I consider that the better view is that it is.” In his recent discussions with the EU, has it confirmed that it shares that better view—in which case, why would one need to consider another separate arbitration mechanism for dealing with the backstop? Or has the EU said that it does not regard binding arbitration as applying to the backstop itself?

The Attorney General: That is a question I would have expected from such a sophisticated Select Committee Chair. The problem is that although the arbitration system applies to the protocol, the question that one asks the arbitrator is at the heart of the effectiveness of any arbitration. Although I am not at this stage able to disclose to the right hon. Gentleman the question that has been proposed by the United Kingdom to the Commission, the question is everything. He may very well need to take that into account, because the question about when the protocol would end is likely to be determinative of whether the mechanism is effective.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I am glad to see that the Attorney General’s powers of alliteration have not dimmed since we first appeared in court together, and I know that neither have his independence, rigour, and respect for his constitutional position, which should never be questioned. Does he agree that when dealing with important matters of textual analysis and detail, it is unhelpful to attempt a running media commentary? Such commentary will inevitably be partial and inaccurate, and these matters are best pursued with care and rigour, and with the overall objective that he has just given to the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn).

The Attorney General: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for that question, and of course he is right. Any negotiation of this kind involves dealing with complex legal questions and matters, and a running commentary that is partial and often based on hearsay and rumour is not helpful to the analysis of the question, or conducive to the success of the negotiations.
Mr Speaker: Order. I am sensitive to the fact that this issue is of enormous, and for some consuming, importance. I therefore want to let the question run, but colleagues must ask short questions of one sentence, and the Attorney General will treat them as he sees fit.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I understand that the Attorney General’s conversations with the Cabinet are privileged, but has he turned his mind to the concerns that, should the backstop be indefinite, it is likely to breach the commitments under the Brexit agreement, and indeed the commitments that are given to me as a Northern Ireland citizen under article 3?

The Attorney General: The hon. Gentleman knows that if I were to answer that question, I would be breaching the Law Officers’ convention. All I can say is that I turn my mind to a great many of the legal implications of the treaty, and those that he has mentioned have not escaped me.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The withdrawal agreement contains many issues that we all agree on, such as citizens’ rights and a transition for business. Is it still the EU’s negotiating position that in order to reach agreement on our long-term relationship we need to agree a withdrawal agreement first?

The Attorney General: Yes.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Northern Ireland protocol is there primarily to protect the peace process. Yesterday, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland made some rather unfortunate comments that killings during the troubles at the hands of the security services were “not crimes”. Has the Attorney General advised her that her comments were ill-informed, insensitive and seriously potentially contemptuous of the current legal process, wherein the Director of Public Prosecutions is shortly to announce whether prosecutions will be brought against soldiers for unlawful killings on Bloody Sunday? Will he please tell his colleagues to be more mindful of these conventions in future?

The Attorney General: I think the hon. and learned Lady knows that the Secretary of State has corrected those comments. I do not think it is necessary for me to advise her on the various matters that she suggests. I believe firmly that the Secretary of State will not have intended any offence and she has, in any event, corrected those remarks.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): It is widely reported that, should the Attorney General have a more successful trip to Brussels tomorrow than he has managed so far this week, he will be putting any concessions that he receives on the backstop to a star chamber of Eurosceptic lawyers—one QC, six Tory MPs and one Democratic Unionist party MP. Why are there no MPs from other parties in the star chamber?

The Attorney General: I assure the hon. Gentleman that I shall be putting them to the star chamber of this House. I am delighted that there are eight very distinguished Members who are going to sit in judgment on my opinion, but I expect and welcome the judgment of all Members of this House, on both sides of it.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I really hope the Attorney General appreciates the fundamental concerns here, because it now seems that as well as being part of the negotiating team he is advising the Government on the outcome of the negotiations. It seems he will then bring his proposals to the star chamber and then he will have to answer to this House. First, will he commit to publish any advice that he gives the Prime Minister on any concessions that he receives? Secondly, will he record what he has said in the star chamber, so that all MPs can make a decision on Tuesday on exactly the same information?

The Attorney General: The hon. Gentleman is laboured under a misconception. I am not appearing before any star chamber, either on this side of the House or the other. The star chamber I am appearing in front of is this House. I will account to this House. I am not going to be appearing in front of any star chamber, although it is composed, as I say, of exceptionally distinguished people. Any Member of this House can come and see me if they like and I shall account to this House. I say to the hon. Gentleman: do not grieve because I shall, I assure him, be wholly open about my advice. He asks me whether I will commit to publishing it. I will commit now to saying to this House that I shall publish my legal opinion on any document that is produced and negotiated with the Union.

Leaving the EU

6. Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on his Office’s priorities.

Mr Speaker: Order. We are running late, but I am willing to accommodate colleagues. I know that the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), notwithstanding any advance text that she has penned, will express herself with admirable succinctness, which reflects the urgency of the situation.

Deidre Brock: I will attempt to be pithy, Mr Speaker. We now know that the Department for Transport’s botted tendering process for ferry contracts has already cost the taxpayer £33 million to settle legal action. Will the Attorney General tell us whether similar tendering...
processes across Government could mean further litigation, and how much public money has been set aside for the contingency of such court action?

The Attorney General: The hon. Lady knows that she is asking me questions that belong to the Department for Transport, not to me. These matters do not come to the Law Officers unless they have a Law Officers’ point, so the reality is that I am afraid I must direct her to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport.

Stuart C. McDonald: Will the Attorney General therefore confirm whether or not he provided any legal advice to the Department for Transport in relation to that contract and settlement with Eurotunnel; and if he did, given the huge public concern about this, will he publish it?

The Attorney General: It grieves me to have to say to the hon. Gentleman that he knows I will be bound, and am bound, by the Law Officers’ convention not to disclose either the fact or content of my advice, if any were given on that subject. I am sorry.

Legal Education

8. Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): What steps the Law Officers have taken to promote public legal education.

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): The Attorney General and I are the pro bono champions of Government. As part of that, I work closely with those involved in public legal education, supporting initiatives to increase its profile and to reach more members of the public.

Eddie Hughes: It is important that all citizens have the opportunity to learn about the law and their basic criminal legal rights, so will the Solicitor General explain his vision for the public legal education committee?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the work of my public legal education committee, which released its vision statement in October 2018. Among the goals that we have set, we are looking at scaling up the delivery of PLE via the legal profession, using on and offline methods, and we are looking to embed it in public services as an aspect of early intervention in health advice and community settings.

Treason

9. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What information his Department holds on the most recent prosecution for treason.

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): The most recent prosecution for what is sometimes known as high treason was that of William Joyce, also known as Lord Haw-Haw, in 1946. Treason remains an offence that can be prosecuted. However, its provisions are somewhat archaic. Modern criminal and terrorism offences are more likely to be applicable and provide sufficient sentencing power, and usually offer a better chance of a successful conviction.

Mr Hollobone: Will the Solicitor General strongly encourage the Law Commission to revise its 2008 guidance that the Treason Act 1351 has ceased to be of contemporary relevance, so that the law may be applied to British nationals who betray our country by going abroad to join a jihad against Her Majesty’s armed forces?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to remind us that the 1351 Act is very much on the statute book. The question of who the sovereign’s enemies are is perhaps easily answered when we have clearly defined state actors who are clearly acting against the interests of our country. It is somewhat more difficult when it comes to returning foreign fighters, but I assure him that when people come back to this country who have committed atrocities abroad and where there is evidence, we will prosecute them.
Knife Crime

10.44 am

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): To ask the Home Secretary to make a statement on the crisis of knife crime.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): The Home Secretary flew to Brussels last night to participate in the EU Justice and Home Affairs Council, the significance of which at this time I am sure colleagues across the House will recognise. He asked me to respond to this urgent question on his behalf.

The senseless killings in recent days, and the too many others before them, have rightly shocked the country. Our thoughts and sympathies are with the families of all the victims and everyone affected. There is no denying the urgency of this issue. Day in, day out, we are acting to end the bloodshed. At the start of the week, the Home Secretary came to the House to set out our approach to serious violence. He said there was no single solution and that we had to unite and fight on all fronts to stop the slaughter.

We are taking a tough law enforcement approach with our Offensive Weapons Bill, which is going through Parliament, and we have listened to what the police tell us they need and at their request are introducing knife crime prevention orders in that Bill. We are also increasing police funding by up to £970 million next year, including council tax, and police and crime commissioners are planning to recruit hundreds of new officers as a result.

We recognise, though, that we cannot arrest our way out of this. In the serious violence strategy, we announced a multi-agency approach, and we will consult very soon on a statutory public health duty of care to ensure that all agencies that can and must work on this play their part. We are also investing more than £220 million in resources to respond. We need more resources for the police, and we need them now.

Yesterday, the Home Secretary met police chiefs from seven forces and others. Since 2010, Tory Governments have cut more than 9,000 officers from those forces alone. Did the Home Secretary apologise to them? Did he offer them extra resources? Is the Minister able to tell us?

In 2009, the Home Affairs Committee published a comprehensive appraisal of what needs to be done to fight knife crime. We know about the success of what has been done in Glasgow. Does the Minister accept that what frightened communities, families and mothers need is not more hand-wringing, not more summits, not more committees, and not more reviews? They want the Government to put the necessary resources into the youth service, into work with excluded children, into strengthening mental health services for young people and adolescents, and, above all, into the police service.

Only then will the public believe that the Government are taking the knife crime epidemic seriously.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the right hon. Lady for her comments. She knows from the many debates that we have had on this matter, and the many occasions on which she and I and Home Office Ministers have discussed it, that we all recognise the great fear, worries and concerns of mums and dads in certain parts of the country that have been suffering from these crimes for some time. That is precisely why we issued the serious violence strategy last year.

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In 2009, the Home Affairs Committee published a comprehensive appraisal of what needs to be done to fight knife crime. We know about the success of what has been done in Glasgow. Does the Minister accept that what frightened communities, families and mothers need is not more hand-wringing, not more summits, not more committees, and not more reviews? They want the Government to put the necessary resources into the youth service, into work with excluded children, into strengthening mental health services for young people and adolescents, and, above all, into the police service.

Only then will the public believe that the Government are taking the knife crime epidemic seriously.

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Only then will the public believe that the Government are taking the knife crime epidemic seriously.
The right hon. Lady talked about summits and meetings and so on. The point of those is getting the right people into the room to tackle this issue together. As we all know, there is no single simple solution. I wish that there were, but the issue is very complex. That is why there are both short-term and longer-term measures in the strategy, which meet with the approval of the police and others with whom we engage to try to crack this problem.

I very much hope that today we will yet again hear fruitful, constructive and non-partisan comments about this topic, because it is affecting every single one of our constituencies. We need to work together to get it right, because when I meet victims and their families they want to hear what we are doing, not what our conversations across the Dispatch Box are about.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Many police in London now use body-worn video cameras. Does the Minister agree that that should help to give them the confidence to use stop-and-search in all circumstances within the law as part of a concerted effort to end the terrible tragedies that are afflicting our city?

Victoria Atkins: My right hon. Friend has made a very important point. The use of body-worn cameras enables officers to use their stop-and-search powers with even greater confidence than they had before. Interestingly, the chief constable of Merseyside told us yesterday that since his officers have started using body-worn cameras, the volume of complaints about stop-and-search has decreased dramatically. I think he said that there were about seven last year. This is the point of stop-and-search. If we target it correctly and officers are stopping people when they believe that a search meets the test of being proportionate and necessary, that will not just help them to catch those who are carrying knives, but will, I hope, give confidence to communities.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I thank the Minister for explaining why the Home Secretary is not here to answer this question, but there can be no doubt that the Home Secretary faces a massive crisis on his doorstep. We have heard repeatedly in recent weeks about how the public health approach to knife crime has worked not just in Glasgow, but across Scotland, where knife crime has greatly reduced and crimes of handling an offensive weapon have decreased by 64% over the last 10 years. The evidence speaks for itself, and the World Health Organisation has commended this approach. So I want to know why there is not more of a sense of urgency on the part of this Government about following the public health approach.

The Prime Minister’s comments that police numbers on the streets have not been a factor in this crisis have been met with significant criticism and fly in the face of what experts such as Cressida Dick have told us. By contrast, Scotland has a better record on police numbers: in 2018 in Scotland there were about 32 officers per 10,000 of population, compared with only 21 officers per 10,000 of population in England and Wales. So does the Minister agree that the Home Secretary should take immediate steps to match the ratio of police to population figures that we have in Scotland?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for her question. I understand there are reports of a stabbing in Glasgow last night, and I am sure the condolences of the House are with the families and those concerned.

We are determined to act on the public health multi-agency approach. It was in the strategy published a year ago, and we are due to consult very soon on whether we should put into law that relevant agencies have the duty to collaborate and work together on this. One listens to doctors working in A&E departments talking about the data they can gather and provide to the police, which will then help the police target particular houses on streets in huge cities; precision policing is what it is called in New York and Chicago and places overseas. This sort of data can really help to protect those who may be victims, but also frankly help go after those who may be perpetrators and the gang leaders we are all determined to crack down on.

I thank the hon. and learned Lady for her support on this. We talk a great deal about the Glasgow model, and I for one am very pleased to be learning from it, and also from the experiences in Wales, where great work is being done on adverse childhood experiences.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): A national newspaper this week featured a smirking criminal outside court having been given a suspended sentence for a second knife offence. Will this Minister, whose tenacity is matched by her talent, disregard those who are blinded by the soft soap of self-righteousness and see what in the eyes of those living on the frontline of crime is as clear as crystal: that more of the thugs and gangsters who, through their criminality, punish the innocent, should be stopped, searched, charged and locked up for as long as possible?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my right hon. Friend for his kind words, and I am reminded of the many comments made about him in celebration of his recent knighthood. He makes an important point about sentencing. Of course, it is the judiciary who decide the sentences they impose on defendants as they appear before them in court, but we really must emphasise the importance of the public message on this for local communities living in the sorts of circumstances outlined by the shadow Home Secretary, where people fear for their sons and daughters. That is why we have introduced mandatory minimum sentences for those caught in possession of a knife on more than one occasion. We have asked judges to apply a minimum of six months’ imprisonment to such people to send out that very clear message that holding a knife is not acceptable, is not normal, and if you hold a knife in a public place not only do you put other people at risk, you put yourself at risk as well.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I do not doubt the Minister’s good intentions on this, and I think the whole House would agree on many of the things that can make a difference. The problem is that she could have been saying most of these things about a year ago. There is no real sense that the Government are doing anything on the scale that is needed or with the urgency that is needed, whether that is on extra policing, early intervention, youth intervention or tackling exclusions from schools. One summit is just not enough.
We want to know what the Home Secretary is doing. Is he holding weekly meetings, either in Cobra or in the Home Office, to pull everyone together and get some action by the end of next week or by the end of the month? Let us see something that actually makes a difference and saves lives.

Victoria Atkins: I take the right hon. Lady’s point about meetings and summits and so on. As she knows, the way in which we get things moving in Whitehall and then across local government and local areas is through drawing everybody together into rooms. We have been working on this day in, day out since the serious violence strategy was launched. We are already funding 29 projects through the early intervention youth fund and working with police and crime commissioners to reach those young people who need help. We have already funded many programmes through the anti-knife crime community fund, which involves smaller projects, and I hope that many Members of Parliament will have received letters from me about the projects in their constituencies that have benefited from it. We have a media campaign called #knifefree, which we in this place are probably not aware of because frankly we are not the people that have benefited from it. We have a media campaign to skewer a Minister with a short, direct question. He answered my question, although I might not have employed all the lessons we have learned in our county can help the rest of the country?

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): So, with a suspended sentence for a second offence, it is self-evident that we cannot rely on the judges, can we?

Victoria Atkins: My right hon. Friend yet again attempts to skewer a Minister with a short, direct question. He knows that I must, and will, defend the independence of the judiciary, but my colleagues in the Ministry of Justice and I do emphasise the point to the judiciary about the public messaging of sentences. We impose mandatory minimum sentences for those who are found in possession of knives precisely to get the message out there that this is simply not on.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Can I tell the Minister what the country is saying to the Government? It is saying, “Get a grip of this, and get a grip of it urgently.” Let me give her an example of what I mean. We had a crisis meeting yesterday where the police chiefs demanded emergency funding. The Home Secretary supported that and said that he wanted £15 million of emergency funding. The Chancellor then went on the radio this morning and said that it was a question not of additional resources but of re-prioritisation by the police. Absolutely pathetic! It is about time the Government listened to what the police chiefs are saying. This should not be a matter of debate. They want emergency funding so that they can surge police numbers into those areas where there are real problems. In the short term, that is what works, although of course we need a public health approach in the longer term. Surging police numbers into those areas requires emergency funding, so the Chancellor should be told where to go and the Home Secretary should be supported by the Prime Minister. The whole of this House will say, “Give the police the money they need to tackle this scourge.” The public of this country will have no idea what we are doing if we do not do that, so get a grip and give the police the money they need.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, although I might not have employed all the language that he used. Yesterday’s meeting was not a crisis meeting; it was part of a programme of meetings that the Home Secretary has regularly with chief constables, precisely as one would hope.

On the hon. Gentleman’s point about resourcing, we voted recently to provide just under £1 billion to police forces, with the help of police and crime commissioners. We are actively looking at what the chiefs are saying and what more they need. We are conscious of the need to ensure, over the long term, that in the surge exercises that they conduct regularly as part of their operational policing powers, they can get their officers to the places where they need to be. So I do not think there is any disagreement here about operations; about how the police can crack down on this. The Home Secretary discussed that in detail yesterday with the chiefs precisely because we want to listen to their needs and take the matter forward.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): We know that, when children go into care, they are more likely to join gangs. In Essex, we know that early intervention works; the number of children in care has fallen from 1,600 to 1,000. We also know that stop and search works. We have put 390 more police on the streets in Essex, and the number of stop and search encounters in my constituency has risen from 80 to 500. That is resulting in arrests, which mean that those at the top of the gangs are being taken off our streets. Will my hon. Friend congratulate all those in Essex and look at whether some of the lessons we have learned in our county can help the rest of the country?

Victoria Atkins: I note that some 50 officers were recently sworn in to serve the good county of Essex. We are all learning about, and determined to do something about, the link between exclusions and participation in or victimisation by gangs. The Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), who is sitting next to me, is awaiting delivery of the Timpson report on exclusions. We need to make sure that if children are excluded—if that is what a headteacher believes to be appropriate
not just for the child, but for the wider school community—they have excellent provision of services outside mainstream schooling.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Is it not now beyond dispute that the Government’s cuts to police officer numbers have gone much too far?

Victoria Atkins: I think we all recognise that the demands on policing have changed and intensified in recent years, not just in the realm of serious violence but, for example, in the investigation of historical sexual abuse. There has been a rise in the recognition of modern slavery cases, and in the reporting of domestic abuse cases. That is happening because we are trying to help people to understand when they have been victims of crime, and it has added to the existing pressures on the police. That is precisely why the Home Secretary has said that police funding is his priority for the next spending review, and it is why we have increased the funding to police forces for next year by nearly £1 billion with the help of police and crime commissioners.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The Minister has already mentioned the link with exclusions and the report by the former children’s Minister, Ed Timpson, which I gather has been completed. When will it be published, and when will the lessons be learned? What lessons have been taken away from the “Positive for Youth” report, published in 2011 by the then children’s Minister, about better engagement with young people?

Victoria Atkins: We expect to publish the Timpson report shortly. There are lessons to be learned on youth engagement. When I talk to youth workers and former gang members, I find it is about listening to people with lived experience; it is about former gang leaders and former gang members explaining to young people who may be at risk or already ensnared in criminal gangs, listening to them and advising them about their life chances. That has huge benefit.

Yet again, I ask role models in the sporting world and the music world to help us to send out the message that carrying a knife is not right.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Home Secretary has tried to use the threat of prison to stop young people carrying knives, and it clearly has not worked. I passionately disagree with the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes): short-term prison sentences do not work, and I include six-month sentences in that. Why are the Government creating more mandatory short-term prison sentences in the Offensive Weapons Bill, including for breaches of the new knife crime prevention orders?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising knife crime prevention orders, because it gives me an opportunity to explain what they are. Some of her colleagues in the other place may have misunderstood, because this is not about criminalising young people. We have put these prevention orders in the Bill at the request of the police to help to provide wraparound support to a small cohort of young people who have not yet been convicted of a criminal offence, and who have not yet entered the youth justice system.

Where the police receive intelligence from teachers, families or friends that they think a young person is carrying a knife, and where one of these civil—not criminal—orders is obtained, we will have the structure to wrap services and support around that young person. That might include, if appropriate, banning them from entering a certain postcode—the hon. Lady will know of the sometimes competitive nature of postcode gangs—or from using social media to incite violence. All these requirements can be included in an order to make sure that that child does not continue down the path of criminality, blighting not only their life with the harm they may cause but their life chances by having a criminal record.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I am glad the Minister sees this as not just a London problem. The number of people carrying knives in Thames Valley has doubled in the past five years. Has she considered what role MPs can play in this process so that we are not just observers but participants?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend makes a good point. We are leaders within our communities. If colleagues would like to speak to me afterwards about how they can help to lead the message on knife-carrying in their constituencies, I would be delighted to work with them. Members can google our #knifefree social media campaign, which provides all sorts of information about what one can do if one is worried about a young person or if a young person wants help and advice. There is so much that we as a community can and must do to tackle this.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): We know that the rise in knife crime is multifaceted and multi-layered, we know that we need to adopt a public health approach—increasing community policing, youth work and early years intervention—and we know we need it to be a long-term approach. How will the knife crime summit be determined? Who will attend? Will it be long term, sustainable and cross-party, like the work of the Youth Violence Commission? How will the Government report back to the House?

Victoria Atkins: As I say, the Home Secretary has his meetings with the chief constables. I hesitate to give the House a diary of my engagements in the next couple of weeks, but I am meeting police and crime commissioners. We also have the serious violence taskforce coming ahead of that. The hon. Lady is not letting me finish. I am about to get there. I am just trying to lay out the plan of work. I am meeting PCCs, because they are obviously vital. We have the serious violence taskforce, which, as she knows, is a cross-party body that brings everyone who can help nationally and locally into the same room. The Prime Minister has announced her summit, which will involve not just Ministers, but external stakeholders—victims, youth workers and others—to help to cement the work that is happening under the serious violence strategy.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Does my hon. Friend think the time has come to have a fresh look at sentencing for those caught carrying knives?

Victoria Atkins: We looked at this issue in detail in the preparation of the Offensive Weapons Bill and we have maintained the mandatory minimum sentence of
six months. There are colleagues across the House who do not agree with that approach, but we think it is absolutely right to send out the clear public message that carrying a knife more than once will get you into very serious trouble. I should say that on the first occasion when someone is found carrying a knife it is of course open to judges to imprison them if that is appropriate. Through the Bill, we also wanted to make sure that the law on corrosive substances mirrors that on knives, so that we do not have gangs swapping knives for corrosive substances—we know they have done that in some circumstances—because the law simply is not up to date on that.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Three stabbings have occurred in my constituency since Monday. Two young men were stabbed last night in Queen’s Park, just yards from where I live. We have lost a third of our police since 2011. London policing is at its lowest level for two decades. Three years ago, Westminster City Council pulled all funding from the youth service, after school and holiday schemes. Whatever the debate about the causes of the current escalation in serious youth violence, can we agree that this is a catastrophic decline in our capacity to respond, and that we need an urgent intervention to help these authorities to intervene with young people and stop this tide of violence before it gets worse?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady will know that London is seeing a reorganisation at operational level of how it is policed. I am sure she has made those representations to the Mayor of London, who is accountable for the operation of the police in London, as the PCC. On youth services, my understanding is that Westminster City Council has brought forward a programme called “family hubs”, where it is putting all the services together in one hub to try to make them as easy and accessible as possible for members of the public. I repeat that at the central level we are working to help charities across London and further afield through the early intervention youth fund and the anti-knife crime community fund—I am sure I have written to her about local funds that have benefited from that. These are charities that use youth workers, many of whom have lived experience of the problems they are trying to counteract. That sort of work is very effective in trying to steer young people away.

Mr Speaker: The Minister’s answers are comprehensive, and that comprehensive character of answer and her commitment to the House are hugely appreciated. However, may I gently say to her that we are, in productivity terms, making very slow progress? So if she could speed up a bit, that would be enormously appreciated, but I respect her commitment on this subject, as well as her unfailing courtesy, which I think everybody acknowledges.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Nineteen people have lost their lives to this in London alone this year, which comes after a record number last year. Clearly, we need to send the message that carrying a knife is unacceptable, and I agree with what has been said about the increased use of stop and search. Will the Minister talk about an amnesty for knives, so that we can take them off the streets, they can be turned into the police and they are therefore taken out of circulation?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. One of the most successful parts of Operation Sceptre, the national weeks of action to which police forces throughout the country sign up, is exactly what he mentions: amnesties and knife bins. As I said, in the most recent week of Operation Sceptre, more than 9,000 knives were taken off our streets.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Ind): This is now a national crisis, with young people losing their lives not only on the streets of major cities but even in towns like Dudley. In the west midlands we have lost 2,000 police over the past few years. The police urgently need more resources so that we can get more police on the streets to deal with this problem. We have also lost youth services, sports clubs and all the other projects that keep young people off the streets and out of trouble. Will the Minister support the police and crime commissioner’s bid for more funding for the West Midlands Violence Prevention Alliance? Finally, when people are caught with knives they should be locked up. That is what the Conservatives promised in their 2010 manifesto, but that promise has never been upheld.

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Gentleman knows that I have often raised on the Floor of the House the use of reserves, because police reserves are made up of money that the taxpayer has given to police forces to spend on policing. In March last year, West Midlands police’s reserves were £85 million. I am sure the police and crime commissioner would be able to explain why that money is sitting in reserves and, indeed, he may have spent some of it in the past year, but the issue with funding is how it is spent as much as how much is given. On the hon. Gentleman’s point about sentences, we have put the legislation in place, and although it is open to any judge or magistrate to imprison someone who is found in possession of a knife once, it is then mandatory on the second occasion of their being caught. If that is not being followed by judges, it is a decision of the judiciary.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I appreciate that the focus is on cities at this difficult time, but will my hon. Friend reassure my constituents in Erewash that measures will be put in place to make sure that this epidemic does not spread to our towns?

Victoria Atkins: I very much will. I was delighted to visit my hon. Friend’s Erewash constituency recently to see the use of a scheme called Radio Link, which helps to co-ordinate the activities of people in the local town centre with the police. Those types of schemes are not huge in terms of resources or their public impact, but they can make a real difference in helping the police to police our streets.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): On behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer), I am sure the House will want to send condolences for the young man who was murdered in Leyton yesterday.

Tackling knife crime requires an effective criminal justice system. With a damning National Audit Office report out last week highlighting the failures of the privatised probation services, it is clear that the system is not working. A joined-up approach is clearly required,
so what discussions has the Home Office had with the Ministry of Justice to ensure that the probation service is fit for purpose?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady, and we of course echo her condolences to the grieving family. She is absolutely right that probation needs to be part of the answer. We have talked about imprisonment, but effective probation can steer children and young people away from criminality. I am in discussion with my ministerial counterparts in the MOJ about that, but we need to ensure that the criminal justice system is able to respond quickly and robustly to those who take the very bad decision to carry a knife or, indeed, to use one.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I agree with the Minister that there is no one single solution to knife crime. As we heard earlier, knife amnesties are used right across the country, but there are often press reports questioning whether they are actually useful or working. Surely every single time we take a knife off the street, that is a good thing. Will the Minister confirm that knife amnesties do work?

Victoria Atkins: I most certainly can confirm that, and I encourage all constabularies that are taking part in Operation Sceptre events in the coming weeks to use amnesties as part of their toolbox against knife crime in their local area.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Since the Minister’s party came to power in 2010, knife crime in Wales has risen by 50% and in north Wales by 86%. Yesterday, the Chancellor told the Home Office that extra emergency policing resources would need to be found within the Department. Will she state today that extra emergency policing resources would need to be found within the Department, and you away from criminality. I am in discussion with the fact that this issue not only affects the larger urban areas, but is reaching out across our rural and coastal areas through county lines. I am afraid that I cannot comment on resources or ongoing discussions, but I very much take on board her observations.

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Member for Meirionnydd for her observations. Indeed, we have only known about county lines for a little over a year, and we have seen a dramatic increase in knife crime. Sometimes the causes of violent youth crime?

Victoria Atkins: I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman is supporting our multi-agency approach under the serious violence strategy. He will, I am sure, welcome the fact that part of the troubled families programme, which he knows funds a great number of vital projects across the country to help those who are most deprived, has been apportioned by the Secretary of State specifically to tackle knife crime. It is exactly that sort of approach that will not just commend itself to the House, but have real, real effect on the ground.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Ind): The Minister knows that this is not just a London problem. In cities and towns across the country, including in Nottingham, people want practical answers on this, not politicking across the Chamber. Yes, it is about police officer numbers and, of course, a public health approach is necessary, but may I ask her about the availability of knives and how people, young people in particular, are purchasing them, possibly evading age verification by buying online. There was a time when the Government promised action on that. Will she commit to report to the House on how the Government have cracked down on the online purchasing of knives?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Indeed, it was a pleasure to open the services of Redthread in Nottingham’s hospital recently. Youth workers are situated in the A&E services so that they can reach out to young people at the teachable moment when they come into A&E with injuries. The Offensive Weapons Bill is in the other place at the moment, and it is through that Bill that we are addressing the matter, and I look forward to discussing it with the hon. Gentleman when the Bill comes back.
Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): It is all very well the Minister referring to attending meetings and summits, but police bosses this week demanded an extra 10,000 police officers to deal with this absolutely dreadful problem. More children may well die this weekend. If the Government refuse to provide the 10,000 extra officers that the police bosses demand, it prompts the question: what price do this Government attach to a child’s life?

Victoria Atkins: I hope the hon. Lady recognises how seriously the Government take this issue. We are carefully considering the requests from chief constables and others. This is on top of the work that we do day in, day out to improve the life chances of those who may fall victim to these gangs and who may be ensnared in this criminality, or who may just be carrying knives because of the fear they have when they leave their front door. I encourage the hon. Lady to send out the message loud and clear in her constituency—as I am sure she already does—that carrying a knife is not right and not normal.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): In her opening remarks, the Minister said that knife crime is particularly an issue in our larger cities, but as we have been hearing, it is also a real issue in our towns. In the last year, there have been two stabbings in Rugby in Warwickshire, one in Nuneaton, one in Bedworth and, just recently, one in my town of Leamington Spa. Does the Minister accept that when the Prime Minister was in my constituency last year, 131 knives were seized inside a court! What are the constituency last year, 131 knives were seized inside a court! What are the

Victoria Atkins: I am concerned about this issue, because obviously the Mayor is the police and crime commissioner for London.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Government were warned about cutting police numbers. Had the 20,000 police officers we have lost still been in place and enabled one stop and search per week, there would have been 1 million stop and searches. Had there been one a day, which is not a lot to ask, there would have been over 7 million stop and searches. If we add to that the intelligence-based use of resources, would that not have had a major impact on knife crime?

Victoria Atkins: The right hon. Gentleman rather highlights the reason we changed the voluntary guidance for police officers, in that we do not believe that a one-size-fits-all approach helps. Listening to communities where young people have been stopped and searched without reason—as they see it—we are very conscious that that can harm relations between the police and the community. That is why we have encouraged the use of intelligence-led, targeted stop and search. I refer to the answer I gave earlier about the huge benefit of body-worn cameras in this space, because the public and the police have that extra reassurance that searches being conducted are in fact lawful.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Ind): Why are the Government not making a real and substantial funding commitment now to address this issue, as requested by the Home Secretary? If it is a matter of priorities, why have they agreed to give £20 million of taxpayers’ money to test alternative arrangements to the Brexit backstop—a fool’s errand—while refusing to give our police an extra £15 million to tackle the knife crime crisis and save lives? We need visible neighbourhood policing at the heart of our communities. There should be a one-off fund for a surge in temporary officers targeted at knife crime hotspots, as police forces are requesting.

Victoria Atkins: I assure the right hon. Lady that when we have spoken to the commissioner and her commanders about this, they say that that is exactly
what they are doing on the streets of London. They are surging numbers where they are needed in hotspot areas. If she has particular issues, she should please let me know or speak to the Mayor of London. On the wider point about funding and resources, I am afraid that, as I say, I cannot comment further at this stage, but we are very clear that, with the help of police and crime commissioners, the extra £970 million next year will help with some of the issues that she raised.

**Points of Order**

**Sir William Cash** (Stone) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In the light of Attorney General’s questions this morning, I thought it would be convenient—

**Mr Speaker**: Order. I probably ought to say that is not the norm to take points of order at this stage, but in deference to what I would describe as the celebrity status of the hon. Gentleman, and the salience of his inquiry to earlier exchanges, of which he has recently notified me, I am willing to take his point of order now, and I think the House should listen with bated breath. I mean that most sincerely.

**Sir William Cash**: I am extremely grateful, Mr Speaker. Tomorrow, as recorded on page 12 of today’s *Votes and Proceedings*, the European Scrutiny Committee will be publishing a unanimous report—“The draft EU/UK Withdrawal Agreement: key legal and political questions”—and written evidence entitled “Ministerial Correspondence”. I thought it would be convenient for the House, and for those who pick up on these things in the press and otherwise, to know that that would be available as of tomorrow.

**Mr Speaker**: The hon. Gentleman is ever solicitous towards the House, protective of its interests, and periodically keen to secure its attention for what I might describe as a helpful public information notice. I feel sure that he would work on such a basis in any event, but given his additional status as a highly respected and experienced Chair of the European Scrutiny Committee, we are, if I may politely say so, doubly grateful to him.

**Mr Mark Francois** (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I wish to raise a point of order regarding another Member. I attempted to ring his office and give notice, but I could only leave a message.

Earlier, at Attorney General’s questions, I asked the Attorney General about the sensitive issue of how, if he is now negotiating the Government’s potential deal on the withdrawal agreement and specifically the backstop, he would get round the problem that he would then have to give advice to the House and would therefore, in effect, be marking his own homework. I appreciate that that is a controversial question, but given the seriousness of the matter, I think it was a fair one. As I was leaving the Chamber, the Attorney General’s Parliamentary Private Secretary ran down the corridor and asked to speak with me. I said that I was in a hurry and needed to go, but he insisted. He remonstrated with me about my question and said it was “indecent” of me to ask that question in the House.

I realise that feelings are running high; I am inured to that. Those in the House who know me know that I am not a snowflake. I am used to being disagreed with, but I suggest that for a Government aide to attempt to intimidate a Back Bencher for asking a difficult question is wrong, because if we are not going to ask the Government difficult questions in this place, what is the point of us? I would like to know your opinion, Mr Speaker, on how I should take this further.
Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. Let me say to him, for the avoidance of doubt, that there was nothing in procedural terms disorderly about his inquiry, and from my recollection of what he posited to the Attorney General, there was nothing that I would regard in any way as indecent. A little light-hearted fun was had on the subject of a codpiece, but if memory serves me correctly, it was the Attorney General who introduced the concept of “Cox’s codpiece” and the merit of it being in full working order.

Mr Francois: He brought it up.

Mr Speaker: The Attorney General did indeed raise that matter, and he delivered his point in his usual magnificent baritone and with considerable eloquence. There was nothing improper in procedural terms about what the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) had to say.

If I can, in a light-hearted spirit, say something else to the right hon. Gentleman, it is this. I know that he is not a notably delicate flower, and the reason why I can say that with absolute certainty is that I was myself very dissembling—indeed, I would go so far as to say rude—to him long before he came into this House. It was on the occasion when first we met, at a student conference in the House, and we need to be absolutely clear about that.

Mr Francois: It was a grasshopper.

Mr Speaker: Oh, a grasshopper. All I can say is that thereafter, his career went from strength to strength, and he certainly did not seem to take umbrage.

The right hon. Gentleman is in perfectly good order. I am sorry if there is some ill feeling, but there is no way that anybody is going to intimidate him; I have known him long enough to know that that is simply not going to happen. I am sure the PPS was doing his duty as he thought fit. The hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) is a decent man, and I make no criticism of him, but the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford is not the sort of person to be pushed around, and we need to be absolutely clear about that.

The Leader of the House has been extremely patient, so if there are no further points of order, we come now to the business question.

Business of the House

11.43 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom):

The business for next week will be:

MONDAY 11 MARCH—Remaining stages of the Children Act 1989 (Amendment) (Female Genital Mutilation) Bill [Lords].

TUESDAY 12 MARCH—Debate on a motion relating to section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018.

WEDNESDAY 13 MARCH—My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will deliver his spring statement, followed by a general debate on housing.

THURSDAY 14 MARCH—Debate on a motion relating to the NICE appraisals of rare diseases. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 15 MARCH—Private Members’ Bills. On Tuesday 26 February, the Prime Minister made three clear commitments to this House. I have just confirmed that the meaningful vote will take place on Tuesday 12 March, and I hope that the House will support the Prime Minister’s deal. However, in the deeply regrettable case that the House does not support the deal, I will make a further business statement on Tuesday 12 March in order to fulfil the Prime Minister’s commitments to allow the House to vote next week on whether we should leave the EU without a withdrawal agreement on the 29 March or extend article 50.

On World Book Day, we can all agree with the words of Frederick Douglass, the American social reformer andabolitionist, who said:

“Once you learn to read, you will be forever free.”

World Book Day’s campaign aims to provide every child and young person in the country with a book of their own. It also offers a great opportunity for many children to go to school dressed as their favourite character. If this Chamber were to join in this morning, my choice would be for the Mad Hatter’s tea party as a theme, with my friend the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) taking the leading role.

Tomorrow is International Women’s Day. This year’s theme is “Balance for Better”—promoting a more inclusive world, where equality for women is a right, not a privilege. A balanced world is a better world, and the UK has some way to go until we have a 50:50 Parliament. This is something I hope all MPs will push for so that future Parliaments look more like the society they represent.

Speaking of balance and equality, I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) is the first male Member to take up proxy voting for baby leave. I am sure we all congratulate him and his family on the arrival of their new baby. We also send our warmest wishes to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) and her family on the birth of their baby.

Last but by no means least, it is Apprenticeship Week, so I want to thank the many apprentices working in the House to support the work of MPs and of Parliament. I am lucky enough to have the support of
[Andrea Leadsom]

apprentices in my brilliant Leader of the House’s office, as well as having my ninth annual parliamentary apprentice who is doing a superb job for my constituents.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the very short business for next week and her very long speech on various other matters. I thought this was business questions.

I am absolutely staggered to hear what the Leader of the House says about the business next week. It would have been more appropriate to fulfil what the Prime Minister set out in her statement to this House on 26 February, rather than doing it the other way around and putting in debates that then have to be moved. That would have been more appropriate in the light of the utmost seriousness of what is going to happen to the country in the next few weeks.

The Leader of the House seems to be openly in defiance of the Prime Minister. We also see that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs appears to be announcing that the Easter recess will be cancelled. Will the Leader of the House confirm that he said to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee that “there may not be an Easter recess”?

More Government chaos: the Financial Services (Implementation of Legislation) Bill was pulled before it was debated on Monday. May I ask the Leader of the House why, because a very important cross-party debate was pulled before the Committee, particular as one of the Government’s red lines was lost in the House of Lords yesterday?

Something else that needs to come back to this House is the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union—[Interruption.] I am really sorry, but the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), has had her go. I need to ask the Leader of the House some questions, so would she mind not speaking so loudly?

Something else that has to be brought back to the House is the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union. I do not know whether the Leader of the House heard the point of order from the Chair of the Exiting the European Union Committee yesterday, but he suggested that the Secretary of State is meeting individuals privately and has not said when he is coming to the Committee. My right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) has made it absolutely clear that the Committee wants to hear from the Secretary of State before the vote on Tuesday. Will the Leader of the House please ensure that the Brexit Secretary—with or without his other half, the Attorney General—appears before the Committee, particular as one of the Government’s red lines was lost in the House of Lords yesterday?

We know that the Government have paid £33 million to settle a lawsuit. Labour Members have totalled up the amount of money that the Secretary of State for Transport has cost the taxpayer, including in his previous guises, and it amounts to £2.7 billion. Imagine if all that was given to police officers, bringing them back on the beat. The Metropolitan Police Commissioner said that there is “some link” between violent crime on the streets and police numbers. Of course there is—everybody can see that. It does not matter whether the Prime Minister is in Cabinet Office briefing room A, B or C, the fact is that west midlands police and crime commissioner David Jamieson has asked for £694,000 to set up a violence reduction unit. All PCCs should be given funds straight away, before another young person dies this weekend. Yesterday, my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) raised a point of order to ask when the Home Secretary or Prime Minister will come to the House to update it on knife crime.

There has been yet another defeat in the courts—yesterday the High Court ruled that the Government’s fracking guidelines were unlawful. Mr Justice Dove said that the consultation was “flawed in its design and processes”.

May we have a statement on the Government’s policy—well, lack of policy—on fracking, given that High Court judgment?

It may be the 50th anniversary of the Race Relations Act 1968, but the Government’s “hostile environment” policy has caused immeasurable misery for ethnic minorities. A challenge by the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants found that the Government’s right to rent scheme is “discriminatory” and in breach of human rights laws, and that evidence “strongly showed” that landlords were discriminating against potential tenants because of their nationality and ethnicity. That, again, is a judgment of the High Court, so may we have a statement on the change in policy following that ruling?

The Public Accounts Committee has published its report on the Windrush generation and the Home Office, and stated that the Home Office has failed to take ownership of the problems it created. The Home Office considered 11,800 Caribbean cases, but failed to renew around 160,000 non-Caribbean Commonwealth cases. When will the Government end their discriminatory polices?

Last week the Leader of the House said that the United Kingdom is doing extremely well, and that we are well prepared for exiting the European Union. I think she needs to correct the record, because the Institute for Government identified eight red areas where the Government will not be able to mitigate fully the major negative impacts of a no-deal scenario in 2019. On Tuesday, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs warned that businesses in Northern Ireland will not be ready for new border procedures if there is no deal. Which is it? The Leader of the House mentioned World Book Day—is she “Alice Through the Looking Glass” or is she going through the cupboard into Narnia?

It is with sadness that we remember Lord Bhattacharyya, founder of the Warwick Manufacturing Group—never has his advice been more important than it is now.

I thank Sir Amyas Morse for all his public service. He said that not enough Ministers “sweat blood” over how they spend public money. That lesson needs to be learned by us all, and particularly the Secretary of State for Transport.

We are celebrating International Women’s Day. It was women’s pay day yesterday, which means that as of today women will start being paid for the work they do—they will not be paid for the work they did in the first 65 days because the current pay gap stands at 17.9%. May we have a statement on how the Government will close that gap? We also celebrate the next generation of
young women activists, including Greta Thunberg who started a movement to combat climate change. Our young people are getting ready for their day of action on 15 March. They know that climate change and equality know no boundaries, and that such matters are not about the ego of the few, but that the compassion and co-operation of the many will change the world.

Mr Speaker: Just before the Leader of the House responds, I thank her very much, as will other colleagues, for what she said about World Book Day, and I report that my daughter has today gone to school dressed as Pippi Longstocking. I am sure other Members will have examples with which they can regale the House.

Andrea Leadsom: That is very reassuring, and not at all surprising, Mr Speaker. I am sure the whole House will celebrate the fact that maths A-level is now one of the most popular subjects for students to take, and the whole country can be proud that more children are getting a serious and good education. Thank you for sharing that, Mr Speaker—I shall not share what my children have gone to school in, as because they have not dressed up. That is mainly because they are 23, 20 and 15—[Laughter]! It would be a little odd! They used to go as things like Peter Pan. It used to be fun. I remember making many a costume, but sadly those days are behind me.

The hon. Lady raised a number of extremely important questions. She asked about next steps. She will appreciate that the Prime Minister’s commitments mean that I have had to announce the business as we know it today. As she appreciates, it is the Government’s intention to seek to win the meaningful vote on Tuesday. Should it be the case that the Government do win it, I would then need to come forward—if I had already announced contingent business, I would have to come forward to change it. What we are expecting, and what the Government are working towards, is winning that meaningful vote on Tuesday. As the hon. Lady will know, the Attorney General, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and the Prime Minister herself are very carefully seeking agreement from the European Commission and the EU27 to resolve the outstanding issues on the backstop. It is very important that she understands the reason why the business has been announced as it has.

On recess dates, the hon. Lady will appreciate that for decades, if not longer, Leaders of the House have had to say that recess dates are announced and will then take place subject to the progress of the House. I am sure she appreciates that I will have to make that comment to her again.

On the Financial Services (Implementation of Legislation) Bill and the fact that that business did not go forward, as the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride), said on Monday, it is right that we take the time to look properly at the proposed amendments and consider their impact with the Crown dependencies, which are separate jurisdictions with their own democratically elected Governments. Taking the time to review those amendments was therefore extremely important.

The hon. Lady asks if the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union will appear before the Select Committee. I understand that he has agreed to do so. As she will appreciate, his absolute priority is to seek the support of the European Union for the changes that the UK Government are looking for to the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration. He always shows himself willing to appear before this House for scrutiny. He has been absolutely assiduous in his determination to be open to scrutiny at all times.

The hon. Lady asks about the two debates earlier this week, on Eurotunnel and the Standing Order No. 24 debate. She will be aware that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and the Transport Secretary have both been to the House this week to provide updates on this very important matter. She will know that leaving the EU with a deal remains the Government’s top priority, but it is important that we prepare for all scenarios. The agreement with Eurotunnel secures additional freight capacity and helps to ensure that the NHS has essential medicines in the event of a no-deal Brexit.

The hon. Lady asks about fracking. She will be aware that the Government are determined that, as we move towards a carbon-free future, we will need to continue to rely heavily on gas for some years. Gas is the cleanest carbon fossil fuel and it is essential that we take our gas security seriously. Fracking offers not only a UK-grown source of gas security, but huge opportunities for economic growth in those areas that have it.

On the right to rent, the hon. Lady will be aware that the Government are challenging the judgment. The Government do not agree with the findings and that will continue to be looked at.

Finally, the hon. Lady made a point about the pay gap for women. She will be aware that the Government have brought in mandatory reporting on the pay gap for large employers, with unlimited fines for those who do not comply. The official overall gender pay gap in the UK is 17.9%, which is a record low. There is much more to do, but on the Government side of the House we are committed to reducing and eliminating the gender pay gap.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): For years I have waited, with a degree of patience that verges on indulgence, for any glimmer of insight or glint of inspiration from the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas). Finally, listening to the wireless this week, the eureka moment came, when she persuasively backed a campaign for all children to be taught something of natural history—our native trees, birds, flora and fauna. One might describe it as “the wind in the willows”. Will the Leader of the House bring an Education Minister to this Chamber to say how schoolchildren will learn about those things, not because they are useful but just because they are lovely?

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend that learning about natural history—and, indeed, the history of our country and of the world—is absolutely vital for the education of young people. In particular, in the context of the extraordinary peace that has broken out between him and the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), I am sure that there is a campaign there somewhere. If they perhaps wanted to seek a Westminster Hull debate, I am sure that that would be widely welcomed across the House.
Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. I, too, welcome International Women’s Day and join the celebrations around World Book Day today. If we are looking for further Lewis Carroll characters, perhaps we should look at the Government to find out who is the mad March Hare, and possibly who are Tweedledee and Tweedledum.

I suppose this is about the closest that the business statement will ever come to being a work of fiction—it is sort of Walter Mitty meets “Waiting for Godot”. What it is not is a tablet of stone. I do not think that anyone in the House believes that the statement will survive the rigours of next week, because Tuesday is when the Prime Minister finally faces her Waterloo, and it is not going to end well. With 22 days left before we leave, on Tuesday the road finally runs out and we approach the end of these chaotic, clueless Brexit days. In the intervening weeks, the Government have wasted all their available time by trying to make their rotten deal more palatable to their Back Benchers while hoping beyond hope that the EU somehow bends to their will. Neither of those things looks like it is going to happen, and the Government will go down to another glorious defeat.

There has been lots of talk about postponing that vote, and there is even more talk that this fiction could indeed be the business for next week, and that if the Government are defeated on Tuesday, they will renegade on their commitment to hold consecutive votes on taking no deal off the table and extending article 50. We have been here before with the Leader of the House, when she said to me categorically at business questions that the last meaningful vote would go ahead, only for it to be pulled a couple of days later. While we are grateful for all the reassurances that this will go ahead next week, will she write to party leaders today with a cast-iron commitment that the sequence of events, as put forward by the Prime Minister, will be honoured in full? We need to have it written down that under no circumstances will the meaningful vote be pulled and the subsequent votes taken away.

If there is a defeat on the meaningful vote, we must have those other motions. The Leader of the House must say to the House that they will all be amendable, and that the Government will fully honour the outcome as determined by the membership of this House, without any equivocation. If she will do that today, we can take this work of fiction off the table and have it as nothing other than a little, depressing footnote to the bounties of World Book Day.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his very precise and specific question. I am very pleased to be able to confirm to him that each of the motions that the Prime Minister has committed to next week would be amendable. The Prime Minister has committed to a second meaningful vote by 12 March. I have just announced that the debate on that motion will take place on 12 March. It will be a motion under section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, which will be tabled on Monday. It will be an approval motion as required by the Act and, under the normal procedures of the House, it will be amendable.

Under Standing Order No. 16, any debate under an Act of Parliament—which this is—is limited to 90 minutes, so I expect to bring forward a business of the House motion in order to provide more than 90 minutes. The exact details of that will in due course be discussed through the usual channels, and will ultimately be for the House to agree. Only if the Government have not won the meaningful vote on 12 March will the other debates follow. The motions for the House to approve leaving the EU on 29 March without a withdrawal agreement, and on whether Parliament wants to seek a short, limited extension to article 50 will be tabled by the rise of the House on the day before debate, as is the usual practice. I have given the hon. Gentleman as much clarity and assurance as I possibly can.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on re-establishing a new town building programme in the UK? When I represented the new town of Basildon, I found the development corporation and the new town commission to be extremely effective in delivering affordable homes in large numbers and in building a vibrant community, certainly while I was there. Can we have a programme started again?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes a very good point about new towns—although I would have expected him to talk about new cities, which is what he usually does. I had the pleasure recently of visiting the new Bicester garden town with my excellent Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), who is sitting just in front of him. The Government have backed new towns through their garden communities programme, with 23 towns and villages in the current plans and more to be considered. We have also committed a new £10 million fund to help local areas prepare proposals for development corporations, because we recognise the need for strong delivery vehicles for significant new developments. He will have opportunities to put his views on those proposals in due course.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I was aware before I left the house that it was World Book Day, but I was still glad to be joined on the bus by the Cat in the Hat, Harry Potter, Snow White and Princess Elsa from “Frozen”—some were not readily recognisable, but I certainly recognised the Cat in the Hat.

I am aware that Back-Bench business can be a moveable feast, but if it comes to pass that the debate scheduled for next week has to move, we would look to get repeat time as early as possible, because it is an important debate about the appraisal process for the treatment of rare diseases, and the obstacles to funding for appropriate treatments for muscular dystrophy, phenylketonuria, cystic fibrosis and so on.

I would like to give notice of another matter. We have had on the stocks for some time now an application from the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) and friends for a debate on world autism awareness, this year being the 10th anniversary of the Autism Act 2009, and we would prefer a debate before World Autism Awareness Week, which is from 1 to 7 April.

Andrea Leadsom: As ever, I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me prior notice of upcoming debates. He mentions the Back-Bench debate proposed for next week on rare diseases. I have two young people
in my constituency with cystic fibrosis who are both desperate for access to the Orkambi drug, so it is my very dear wish that that debate go ahead. It will not surprise him to know that I am also extremely keen that it goes ahead because that will mean that the House will have passed a previous motion. I will take careful account of what he is asking for.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Can we have a debate in Government time to discuss the breakdown of the voisinage agreement between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland? The impounding of two Northern Ireland fishing vessels recently shows the Republic of Ireland imposing a hard border while its vessels are still allowed to fish in UK waters off the coast of Northern Ireland.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a very important matter, and I know she is very knowledgeable in this area. The voisinage arrangement has been in place since 1965 but was suspended by Ireland following a decision by the Irish Supreme Court in October 2016, as she knows. On 26 February, two Northern Ireland fishing vessels were detained, but on 1 March the skippers were not convicted under the Probation Act and the vessels were released. Since the suspension of the arrangement, the UK Government have raised this issue several times and have been clear that we cannot accept continued unequal application indefinitely. We continue to explore solutions to reinstate a level playing field as quickly as possible for the benefit of all our fishermen.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Unfortunately, skin cancer is very much on the rise in the UK, partly because lots of us have skin like mine with freckles and fair hair and are not really built for the sun, but still go on holiday to Spain and other places and do not cover up properly when the sun is out.

May we have a debate on skin cancer, so that more people can be made aware that if they have a dodgy mole, going to the doctor can save their life if it is caught very early; so that everyone covers up their kids, particularly when the sun comes up; and so that no one uses a tanning machine, because, frankly, those things are death machines?

While I am here, let me say this. I am nobody special—I am just one of the many, many hundreds of people who have received diagnoses of skin cancer in the last few weeks, including other Members—but I am enormously grateful for the love that many people have shown in the House, some of them people to whom I have been phenomenally rude across the Chamber. I am not going to stop being rude, but may I just say thank you to those who have been truly, truly lovely, including the Leader of the House herself?

Andrea Leadsom: Let me say first to the hon. Gentleman that he is very special to me, and he is very special to many other people both in the House and outside it. He has made some incredibly important points, not the least of which was that his own skin cancer was under his hair. We often put sun cream on the exposed bits, but not necessarily in our hair, because that would be slightly odd. I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman about the need to wear a hat.

Chris Bryant: I have a hat.

Andrea Leadsom: I am pleased to hear it. I hope it is one of those Foreign Legion hats with the collars that we make our five-year-olds wear.

The hon. Gentleman has raised an extremely important point. I will look very carefully at whether we can provide Government time for a debate, but in the meantime I urge him to seek a Westminster Hall debate. I think that sometimes when one of us in the House has a very personal experience we can send a clear message to which people will listen, and I commend him for raising his experience here.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The whole House sends good wishes to the hon. Gentleman. It is good to see him back in his place—and it would not do if there was nobody being rude to people; it just would not do at all.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): As someone who has not always agreed on everything with the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) since we have been in the House together, I too join the chorus of welcome. It is fantastic to see him in his place, and we all admire him for the courage with which he has spoken up to warn others of the dangers of this dreadful disease. Now, that is it for 18 years.

I understand the argument that the Leader of the House has advanced, but the truth is that the Government’s Brexit policy is in chaos. Collective responsibility has disintegrated, junior Ministers run amok—some of them threaten to resign about 27 times, but never have the guts to go through with it—senior Ministers blackmail the Prime Minister in Sunday newspapers and nothing happens to any of them, but a popular parliamentary private secretary is sacked for having the temerity to table an amendment that was in line with Government policy, which the Government then adopted with a Division in the subsequent debate. This is a farce.

May I make a positive suggestion? Given that the Cabinet members are so divided, would they like to come down to Rayleigh and sit in on a meeting of its town council? It is well run, its members are all on the same side—pretty much—it does not leak, it makes decisions, and by God it sticks to them.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving us both barrels. Mr Speaker said earlier that my right hon. Friend was no retiring delicate flower, and I think that that is absolutely the case. He is right to raise his concerns in the Chamber, but I must say to him that I remain absolutely committed to supporting the Prime Minister, to delivering on the referendum, and to ensuring that we leave the European Union on 29 March. That is all I am prepared to say on the subject. The entire Government are united in that respect, and we are putting everything we can into getting that motion passed next Tuesday.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): On 4 April 1949, 12 states signed the Washington treaty that founded NATO. They agreed to collective defence, to living in peace with all Governments and peoples while living under the rule of law, to democracy, and to individual liberty. May we, in Government time, celebrate being one of those 12 early signatories, and also the fact that, hopefully by the end of the year, 30 Governments will have signed up to those policies and principles under the articles of the North Atlantic treaty?
Andrea Leadsom: I think that the hon. Lady will have heard a number of Members agreeing with her that we should celebrate our membership, and being one of the original signatories, every day. We have enjoyed the protection—the mutual protection—of NATO for many decades, and it is right that we continue to support it as a core part of the UK’s mutual defence. As the hon. Lady will know, we are committed to meeting our NATO pledge to spend at least 2% of GDP on defence in every year of the current Parliament, and the UK remains completely committed to NATO. I will certainly take away her request for a debate and see what can be done.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I feel that before I say anything else, I must put on record that I found out today that my daughter—although she did not dress up as a fictional character for World Book Day—is adorned from head to toe in Peppa Pig paraphernalia, which does not surprise me in the slightest.

May I associate myself with the Leader of the House’s earlier comments about apprenticeship week? The international engineering business Score Group plc, whose headquarters is in my constituency, is the largest private employer of apprentices in Scotland. It has 30 facilities around the globe, including one in Brighouse, Calder Valley, where an apprenticeship open evening was held on Tuesday. A similar event is to be held this evening in Peterhead, in my constituency, and I hope to arrive home in time to attend it. Will my right hon. Friend join me in commending the award-winning efforts of Score Group in this respect, and may we have a debate on how we can encourage more young people to embark on engineering and technical roles through apprenticeships?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in congratulating Score Group on its brilliant efforts to encourage more people to take up apprenticeships. He is absolutely right to highlight the fact that, particularly when it comes to the STEM subjects—science, technology, engineering and maths—and the gaining of technical skills, apprenticeships are often a good choice for young people. As he will know, there have been more than 1.6 million apprenticeship starts since May 2015, and we can all be proud of that, because they are giving more and more young people a good start in life. Apprenticeships are devolved in Scotland, but I welcome my hon. Friend’s request for a debate, and thank him for expressing his desire to see more young people enter the engineering and technical industries.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): My constituent Connor MacLeod, who is 23, has Asperger’s and type 1 diabetes. He cannot monitor his own blood sugar levels, and has issues with understanding written and oral questions and requests. He cannot prepare or cook a meal or plan a journey without supervision, and is heavily dependent on his parents. Ewan Lamont, who is 47, suffered brain damage at the age of three weeks as a result of meningitis, and now lives in supported accommodation. He has issues with comprehension, reading, writing and planning journeys, and relies on his elderly mother. Both were awarded zero points in their assessments for the personal independence payment. The changes announced this week are welcome, but they are not good enough. May we have a debate on the wide-ranging issues relating to PIP, as a matter of urgency?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman has raised very concerning constituency issues, and he is absolutely right to do so. I am glad that he welcomes the announcement of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions that we are improving the system by scrapping regular PIP reviews for those with the greatest needs, but he is right to cite cases in which there is concern about the assessment itself. If he will write to me following business questions, I will take up those specific points with the Department on his behalf.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): The coroner of north Staffordshire, Mr Ian Smith, who is retiring—I congratulate him warmly on his work and thank him for it, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash)—has raised the problem of the lack of availability of pathologists to coroners conducting inquests. May we have an urgent debate on the matter? It means that funerals are being delayed, sometimes for weeks, which is causing huge concern and distress to families whose loved ones have passed away.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has raised a very concerning issue. I pay tribute to the amazing work done by coroners: I have had something to do with them myself in connection with constituency matters, and I know that they do an incredible amount of work that is often quite stressful and harrowing. It would probably be best for my hon. Friend to raise the issue in an Adjournment debate, so that he can discuss it directly with Ministers.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Last week I asked the Leader of the House when the review on expulsions would be brought forward to the House. The Leader of the House, surprisingly, said that I needed to give advance notice of this question, so I have written to the Leader of the House and will ask her again this week: when will we be getting the Timpson review into exclusions? This is extremely important.

Andrea Leadsom: I did see the hon. Lady’s tweet saying that she did not know she had to give prior notice. Of course she does not have to give prior notice. My point was merely that she was asking a question about a particular date, and since I am not a mind-reader, if she wanted a specific answer she could have asked me and I could have come to the Chamber well prepared. So the specific answer I can give her now is exactly what the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), said in the urgent question: it is expected that the Timpson review into exclusions will come soon, but my hon. Friend does not have an exact date for it. Interruption. Well, the reality is that there is not an exact date for that report. When I see the hon. Lady’s letter I will try to find out if there is any further clarity on when that can be brought to the House, but I absolutely accept her desire to see urgent evidence on the issue of a link between exclusions and what happens to young people. She is absolutely right to be so passionate about the problems with serious violence, and I commend her for that.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I was pleased to support the ten-minute rule Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) on low-level
letterboxes, and I am delighted that that has come to fruition and that there will be changes. However, I was shocked yesterday to receive a letter from Royal Mail informing me that no mail would now be delivered to one estate in my constituency and that the residents would have to go to the Royal Mail depot to collect their post. The reason for this is that the postie who delivers that part of the round was threatened with a knife at his throat on the estate and, as a result, Royal Mail has withdrawn postal services. May we have a debate or a statement in Government time on the threats our posties face in carrying out their duty to the wider public?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend raises a really concerning case; it is appalling to hear that a postal worker would be threatened with a knife in that way. That is appalling when they are doing their best to give a good service to all residents. It equally seems very harsh on the residents of that estate to have the entire postal service withdrawn. I encourage my hon. Friend to raise that matter directly on 19 March at Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions or perhaps to submit a parliamentary written question to BEIS asking what more can be done.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Depression among men and women is one of the hidden ailments in society in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The smile often hides the true fact that the life and soul of the party is in reality empty, exhausted and perhaps even hurting physically. People can be active socially but inside are depressed, numb and self-loathing. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement or debate on this matter?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman raises a very important issue and is absolutely right to do so. He will be aware that the Government are putting a record £12 billion into mental health issues to try to achieve parity of esteem between mental health and physical health issues, and at the heart of the NHS long-term plan is the biggest expansion of mental health services in a generation. It will see 350,000 more children, at least 380,000 more adults and, very dear to my own heart, 24,000 more new and expectant mothers able to access mental health services; that is very important. It will also see 24/7 mental health crisis care for adults, children and young people rolled out through NHS 111, giving them access to vital support when they need it, and for the first time ever we will have comprehensive access standards for mental health. So we are seeing change; it is absolutely vital that we do, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue.

**Ellie Reeves** (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): On the day before International Women’s Day will the Leader of the House join me in recognising that there are currently almost 4,000 women in prison in this country, many of whom have been victims of domestic abuse or require support for mental health or drug and alcohol addiction? Will she also recognise that at least 17,000 children are affected each year by maternal imprisonment? May we therefore have a debate in Government time on the female offender strategy?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady is right to raise this important issue. Of course, quite often those women have very young children so the impact of being in prison is not just on them; it is on their family with the breakdown of the family that ensues. The hon. Lady will be aware that the Government have prepared a draft Domestic Abuse Bill that will be receiving pre-legislative scrutiny. That will radically change the way that women are protected from the kind of domestic violence and abuse issues that all too often wind up with them being imprisoned because of retribution or lack of access to justice. The hon. Lady is right to raise the Government’s strategy on women prisoners, and I will certainly see whether Government time can be found for that.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): May we have a debate—another debate—on Home Office incompetence? I have a constituent who is going to become an overstayer in the country today because she cannot sit her Home Office life-in-the-UK test as the same Home Office has failed to return her expired passport. We have had no progress via the hotline, so may we at least have a Minister come to the House and take some responsibility for this shambles?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am very sorry to hear that; I, too, have had cases where passports have not been returned in good time. I am also sorry to hear that the hon. Gentleman has not had any success with the MPs’ hotline, which is designed to enable MPs to intervene on behalf of constituents. I recommend that the hon. Gentleman raises this directly with the Home Office and if he wants to write to me after business questions I can do that for him.

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): It is nice that the Leader of the House talks about World Book Day, but 700 libraries have closed since 2010 under this Government. May we have a debate about that, because earlier this week the National Literacy Trust released research showing that a quarter of eight to 18-year-olds now read daily, compared with 43% back in 2015? That is a pretty shocking statistic; is not the loss of our libraries a lot to do with that?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I share the hon. Gentleman’s love of libraries, and he will be aware that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport works with the Libraries Taskforce to support libraries, and the Government are committed to seeking a sustainable future for them. He will no doubt appreciate that the change in the reading levels has a lot to do with social media and so on—I am constantly struggling to get my own daughter to read a book rather than go on Instagram, for example—so there are challenges. The hon. Gentleman is also right to raise the importance of libraries not just for reading books, but also as community hubs. Many other activities take place in libraries, and it is vital that we ensure that local authorities in England keep up their statutory duty to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service.

**Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): May we have a debate in Government time on postcode discrimination? The Leader of the House will know that I have raised many times the issue...
of unfair delivery surcharges which result in £38 million of additional costs for Scots citizens every year. Is she content that her Government’s latest dismissive response to my MSP colleague, Richard Lochhead, is to tell Scots that they will just have to “shop around”, rather than taking action on this outrage?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly share the hon. Gentleman’s concern at the postcode lottery around delivery charges to different locations. He will appreciate that there are obviously different costs incurred in delivering to more remote areas, but the principle of a single charge where that has been agreed should be upheld. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to perhaps seek an Adjournment debate so that he can discuss this properly directly with Ministers, who could then see what more can be done.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Today is indeed World Book Day, and I am sure we all want to thank teachers, parents, mentors and schools in our constituencies for their efforts in delivering quality literacy education to young and old alike. Shockingly, the UK ranks 17th for literacy out of 34 OECD countries, and one in five children in the UK cannot read well by the age of 11. Today sees the release of the incredibly moving documentary “H is for Harry”, described by The Sunday Times as “casting a spotlight on one of the biggest education scandals in Britain”.

It was filmed at Reach Academy in my constituency and tells the story of 11-year-old Harry’s struggle to learn to read, and indeed that of his father and grandfather. Following the release of that documentary, may we have a debate about intergenerational illiteracy, which is more widespread than we realise, its impact on social isolation, life chances and wellbeing, and the increasingly urgent need for much more early intervention?

Andrea Leadsom: I am really sympathetic to the hon. Lady. Through the work that I have been doing for the Prime Minister in an inter-ministerial group looking at early years, I have found that one of the challenges that parents often face is their child having delayed speech. That has an impact on the child’s ability to learn, and therefore to learn to read. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that we need to look at earlier interventions. On the other hand, I am sure she will join me in welcoming the fact that 1.9 million more children are being taught in good or outstanding schools than was the case in 2010, that 86% of all schools are rated as good or outstanding, up from 68% in 2010, and that the gap between disadvantaged pupils and others is narrowing. All these outcomes represent a good direction of travel, but she is absolutely right to raise the importance of literacy at an early age.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I have engaged in extensive correspondence with successive Secretaries of State at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to urge them to introduce a cap on the price of resale tickets on online platforms, as that is the only way to protect consumers from the extortion and sharp practice of big business. I have been told repeatedly that imposing such a cap would not work, but I have been given no explanation as to why it would not work. Will the Leader of the House make a statement acknowledging that the current system is not working and explaining why such a cap on the price of resale tickets would not work? Will she work with me to stand up for consumers?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to stand up for consumers, and we are all aware of issues relating to the unfair resale of whatever it might be—it is often concert and theatre tickets. I recommend that she seeks an Adjournment debate, so that she can put her points directly to Ministers to see what more they can do.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in welcoming the announcement today by the Welsh Labour Government of a new specific fund for university student mental health services? Will she also commit to a debate in Government time on student mental health services?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly join the hon. Lady in welcoming that new strategy from the Welsh Government. It is incredibly important that we do everything we can to protect the mental health of young people. It is pleasing to see that individual universities right across the United Kingdom are doing more to try to support the mental health of their students. It is right that they should do that. Equally, I am sure that she will welcome the fact that the Government are putting a record £12 billion of investment into mental health and that we are developing a 24/7 health crisis care service that will be accessible to adults, children and young people. It will be rolled out through the NHS 111 service and give people access to vital crisis care whenever they need it.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): May we have a debate in Government time on the importance of, and investment in, cervical cancer charities? Local charities such as the Michelle Henderson Cervical Cancer Trust in my constituency and Jo’s Cervical Cancer Trust play a huge role in reducing the rates of cervical cancer, but the uptake of cervical cancer tests is at a 20-year low. Many years ago, when I was in my teens, I was unfortunate enough to contract the human papilloma virus. I went on to give my cells to develop the new vaccine, and I am very proud of that. That vaccine is saving lives, but young women are still contracting cervical cancer and dying because they are not going to get their cervical smears. May we have a debate in Government time to discuss this important issue?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that having a cervical smear is a critical thing that every woman can do to protect herself. I am sure all hon. Members would encourage every woman to go and get that smear and not to let time go past, because there are often no symptoms until it is too late. I would also like to commend the hon. Lady for her own personal contribution to ensuring that others do not have to go through what she went through. I encourage her to seek a Westminster Hall debate so that all hon. Members can contribute their thoughts on this important issue.

Several hon. Members rose—
Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The prize for perseverance and patience goes to Sarah Jones.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I want to raise the issue of knife crime, which has been the subject of much debate this week. Yesterday, the officers of the all-party parliamentary group on knife crime, which I chair, wrote to the Prime Minister with a range of suggestions and asking for a meeting. They suggested that, alongside her summit, she should host an event with young people who have been affected by knife crime, so that they could put their point of view across, as that is also important. Will the Leader of the House convey that message to No. 10? Will she also tell us whether she can guarantee that the Offensive Weapons Bill, which has been through the Lords and is due to come back to this place, will come back before the Easter recess?

I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her efforts. There is huge concern across the House about the recent spate of knife crimes and the loss of so many young lives. What a terrible waste. I will certainly draw the Prime Minister’s attention to the letter that the hon. Lady has written asking for a meeting with young people. She will be aware that the Prime Minister will be holding a summit in Downing Street with community leaders, including the police, in the coming days to look at what more can be done. She will also be aware that we have published a serious violence strategy and established the serious violence taskforce. With regard to the Offensive Weapons Bill, we will be bringing it back to the Commons as soon as possible. I cannot absolutely commit to that happening prior to the Easter recess, simply because we do not know what the course of events will be following what happened prior to the Easter recess, simply because we do not know what the course of events will be following next week’s votes, but I will certainly take her request back to the business managers with real urgency, and we will see what can be done.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker: I apologise—there is another prize for even greater patience and perseverance, and it goes to Naz Shah.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Leader of the House may be aware that the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims recently came together and published a definition of Islamophobia. Given the crisis that the Conservative party finds itself in over Islamophobia, does she agree that it is right we should have a debate in the House on Islamophobia?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising this issue. I am sure she will be pleased to see that the Conservative party is taking very strong action in any cases of Islamophobia that we identify. We have been extremely robust and urgent in our response to this. She raises the important point about whether we should seek a definition of Islamophobia. I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate in the first instance so that she can discuss with Foreign Office Ministers whether that would be a useful way forward.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the Leader of the House for her patience and perseverance.

12.37 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for this opportunity to update the House on the current situation between India and Pakistan in Kashmir, as promised after the urgent question was tabled last Wednesday. On 14 February, a terrorist attack against a convoy near Pulwama in India-administered Kashmir killed more than 40 members of the Indian central reserve police force and injured many others. The individual who claimed responsibility for the attack associated himself with the group Jaish-e-Mohammed. This suicide attack drew international condemnation, including from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and increased tensions between India and Pakistan.

Exactly what happened after the attack remains contested, but it is our understanding that on 26 February Indian aircraft crossed the line of control between India-administered Kashmir and Pakistan-administered Kashmir and carried out airstrikes into Pakistani territory. The following day, Pakistan launched missile strikes into India-administered Kashmir and there was an aerial exchange between Indian and Pakistani fighter jets. An Indian air force plane was shot down by Pakistan and its pilot was captured. At this point there was a serious risk that a mishap could lead to a fully-fledged war between the two nations, with both regional and international implications.

On 28 February, the Pakistani Prime Minister, Imran Khan, announced that he would hand over the captured Indian pilot. The next day, Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman returned to India. This, together with public and private indications that Pakistan was prepared to tackle the terrorist groups that threaten India, has seen a welcome pause in the escalating tensions between the two countries. Nevertheless, the UK Government remain deeply concerned by the raised tensions between the two countries and the underlying issues that have led to this situation.

We welcome the fact that India and Pakistan have both stated publicly that they do not want to escalate tensions further. The situation remains fragile, however, and both militaries remain on heightened alert. There accordingly remains a high risk of some further incident, and the situation could move quickly back into crisis. Just this morning, media reports have come in of a deadly grenade attack in Jammu.

India and Pakistan are close and long-standing friends of the United Kingdom. Our bilateral ties with both countries are long and deep, and they are bolstered by the UK’s large Indian and Pakistani diaspora communities, which are also deeply concerned by the situation. We encourage both countries, and our friends on these shores, to find diplomatic solutions to the underlying causes of conflict.

Members should be assured that the UK has worked and continues to work tirelessly through all diplomatic channels to encourage further de-escalation and to ensure long-term regional stability. We do this alongside our international partners and with a wide range of counterparts in India and Pakistan. I visited India last weekend, between 1 and 3 March, and I was able to reiterate to those whom I met that the UK unequivocally condemns
all forms of terrorism, including the appalling terrorist attack in Pulwama that sparked the current crisis. In New Delhi, I discussed with Foreign Secretary Gokhale steps to decrease tension and improve regional stability, including vital efforts to tackle terrorism.

Since I last updated the House, the Indian wing commander has been reunited with his family. We saw that as an important and welcome step by Pakistan to reduce tensions. Our Prime Minister spoke to Prime Minister Imran Khan of Pakistan on 3 March, and they discussed the need to address the causes of this conflict. Our Prime Minister emphasised the importance of Pakistan’s taking action against all terrorist groups, in support of global efforts to counter terrorism.

We remain firmly committed to working closely with Pakistan to combat the terrorist threat and the extremism that sustains it. We recognise the steps that Pakistan has already taken against groups such as the Pakistani Taliban, but we continue to highlight the importance of effective and demonstrable action against all terrorist groups in Pakistan. That is something that Pakistan has committed to undertaking. We have been clear that that action needs to be urgent, sustained, credible and transparent. Alongside others in the international community, we encourage Pakistan to meet the requirements of its Financial Action Task Force action plan, which includes taking specific action to address terrorist financing.

For our part, we ensure that UK aid to Pakistan continues to address the conditions that could allow radicalisation and violent extremism to grow. A more prosperous and stable Pakistan is vital for regional and global security, and it is very much in the UK’s national interest. Our programmes on the ground aim to reduce overall poverty, promote inclusion, increase economic opportunities and meet basic needs, including girls’ education.

The UK and India also have a close working relationship on counter-terrorism, which includes regular dialogue. During Prime Minister Modi’s visit to the United Kingdom last April, the two Prime Ministers agreed to strengthen co-operation to take decisive and concerted action against globally proscribed terrorists and terror entities to protect our citizens. They agreed that terrorist and extremist organisations must be denied space to radicalise, recruit and conduct attacks on innocent people. We will continue to work closely with and support India, but the matter goes well beyond the bilateral India-UK relationship.

We believe that all countries need to work closely together to disrupt global terrorist networks, their financing and the movement of terrorists, including foreign terrorist fighters. As part of international efforts to tackle terrorism, the UK continues actively to support the listing of JEM leader Masood Azhar at the UN. The JEM is already listed by the UN and has been proscribed in the UK since 2001, and in Pakistan since 2002.

In parallel to the important fight against terrorism, we expect India and Pakistan to focus on securing longer-term regional stability and security. Dialogue is an important confidence-building mechanism, even though we recognise the complexities. We strongly encourage both countries to engage in that way. The UK will follow developments closely, and we stand ready to support should India and Pakistan both deem that to be constructive.

As hon. Members will be aware from our conversations both at the all-party parliamentary Kashmir group and in this House only eight days ago, our long-standing position is that it is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting political resolution, taking into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people. It is not for the UK to prescribe a solution or act as a mediator. In the meantime, I confirm to the House that we continue to monitor the situation closely. Naturally, we keep our travel advice under constant review.

I close by reiterating the Government’s wholehearted support for those who fight terrorism, and restating our sustained commitment to working with India and Pakistan to further de-escalate the current situation. Many Members of the House—a lot of them are here today—agree that a calming of these tensions is in our collective interests. I think we have an important part to play. When I went to New Delhi and Mumbai last weekend, I was struck by how many of my counterparts had watched last week’s urgent question. The message goes out loud and clear from this House that here there are many friends of India and Pakistan who wish to see a better future for all who live in Kashmir. I commend this statement to the House.

12.45 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I thank the Minister of State for advance sight of his statement.

There is great concern across this House, and in many of our constituencies, about what is happening in Kashmir and the tension that that is creating between India and Pakistan—the biggest military confrontation between the two countries for 20 years. I applaud the Foreign Office team for keeping the House updated and for the sober and constructive tone of the statement.

It is important at the outset to go back to the immediate cause of this crisis, namely the vicious terror attack on a convoy of Indian troops travelling through Pulwama on 14 February, leaving more than 40 of them dead. India has been absolutely right to take action against the terror group responsible, known as the JEM, and to demand that Pakistan take action as well.

We welcome the fact that Pakistan has started to take the necessary action, with the detention of several members of the JEM and other proscribed organisations earlier this week. As the Indian Government have done, however, we urge Pakistan to go further by, first, prosecuting those individuals if there is evidence of their links to terror offences; and, secondly, arresting and prosecuting the head of the JEM, Masood Azhar. We welcome the latest moves to ensure that Masood Azhar is finally designated as a global terrorist by the UN Security Council. May I ask the Minister of State whether there are signs of movement on that issue by China, given its previous veto of such action?

Finally on the Pulwama attack, will the Minister join me in urging the Indian authorities, at national and regional levels, to follow the welcome instructions of the Indian Supreme Court to ensure the protection and safety of the innocent civilians of Kashmiri origin—men and women, from suited businesspeople to street traders—who have faced violent reprisals across India following the attack?

I turn to the recent military escalation around the line of control. In this age of doctored images and social media misinformation, it has been genuinely bewildering
trying to work out what has actually happened, as opposed to what has been claimed. I think we can all say one thing with clarity: both sides have a responsibility to dial down the rhetoric, de-escalate the tension and avoid taking any further military action—in the air or on the ground—that could inflame the situation further and risk a descent into open conflict.

As the shadow Foreign Secretary said on this subject last week, the danger of this claim and counter-claim—the tit-for-tat attacks and what we are repeatedly told are airstrikes designed to send a message—is that amid the fog of war, mistakes will be made, and even without either side intending it, a major incident will occur from which there will be no going back. I know the Minister of State will agree that instead we urgently require the resumption of immediate talks between India and Pakistan, to de-escalate the crisis and avoid any further military action.

I would go further than that and say this should be the catalyst for the resumption of proper negotiations and a substantive dialogue between India and Pakistan on the future of Kashmir. The blueprint is there in the sadly short-lived plan worked out between the Singh and Musharraf Governments in the early 2000s. If such dialogue was possible back then, and if a workable, mutually agreed plan for Kashmir was possible back then, it can be possible today or, at the very least, after the Indian elections this spring.

What we must remember about the Singh-Musharraf plan is that it had at its heart not just military disengagement on both sides but a genuine regard for the political and economic rights of the Kashmiri people that, along with their human rights and humanitarian needs, have been so tragically overlooked for the past 70 years.

Let me repeat what my right hon. Friend the shadow Foreign Secretary said last week: our thoughts must first and foremost be with the innocent people of Kashmir, over whom this battle is being fought. Their human rights have been serially abused, their humanitarian needs have been neglected and their wishes for their own future have been treated as unimportant.

Generation after generation of Kashmiri children face growing up trapped in the same cycle of instability, violence and fear. It is time to break that cycle. Only peaceful dialogue and a negotiated settlement can achieve that, and I hope the Minister of State will continue urging both sides not just to de-escalate the current tensions, and not just to take effective action against the terror groups that helped create that tension, but to commit to resuming constructive dialogue to eliminate those tensions for good and finally bring peace and stability to the people of Kashmir.

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Lady for her thoughtful and wise words. She is absolutely right in many ways about one of the depressing things for all of us as parliamentarians in recent months. Despite all the attention on the battles being fought on Brexit, a huge amount of work is going on on this issue. We all feel strongly about this, and I have spent a lot of time, either on the phone, in video conferences or in person, with our excellent ambassadors, Sir Dominic Asquith in New Delhi and Tom Drew in Islamabad. I realise just how much work has gone on behind the scenes as we try to play our part in bringing about the dialogue to which the hon. Lady refers. Where I entirely agree with her, and I think the whole House would agree, is that it is time to break the cycle, which can happen only through dialogue. She is quite right to recognise that, after the desperately tragic events of 14 February, making substantive steps forward in the next five or six weeks, during the Indian elections, is not entirely realistic. However, once the dust has settled on those elections—obviously in Imran Khan we have a relatively new Pakistani Prime Minister, too—one hopes that sense will prevail and there can be ongoing dialogue. Obviously, the UK stands ready to keep lines of communication open, as we have over the difficult past fortnight or so. We will play our part in that regard.

The hon. Lady asked some specific questions, one of which was about the hoped-for movement by China. Clearly a lot of discussions are taking place at the UN Security Council, and we hope that any veto on proscribing and listing Masood Azhar will not come about.

The hon. Lady referenced the idea that what has happened is still open to some dispute, and I read a rather perceptive piece in The Guardian yesterday that said, rather skilfully, that both sides have an interest in keeping the narrative malleable. That gives both India and Pakistan room to claim victory but also, more importantly, to refrain from further strikes. There is a sense of each side perhaps being able to get the last word because there is that sense of ambiguity, and such ambiguity can at times assist de-escalatory sentiment. It is therefore all the more important for us to maintain elements of that ambiguity, rather than trying to ramp up the pressure.

I thank the hon. Lady for her kind words, which add so much to our diplomacy. There will always be differences of nuance, and perhaps even more fundamental differences, on Foreign Office-related affairs, but it adds so much more to our voice in diplomatic quarters if we are, at times, able to speak as one, particularly during such a tragic era.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I thank the Minister for updating the House, and I thank him and the shadow Minister for their tone in trying to de-escalate the current crisis between India and Pakistan. I read with interest the read-out from the conversation between our Prime Minister and Prime Minister Imran Khan, in which our Prime Minister made it clear that the responsibility for Pakistan is to remove and dismantle the terrorist camps and to make sure that terrorism is not encouraged in Pakistan. What is not clear is the response from Prime Minister Imran Khan to actually make that happen. If it happens, it could lead to dialogue and could prevent terrorism.

Will my right hon. Friend the Minister update the House on what the reaction has been from the Pakistani Government to achieve the peace and stability we all want to see?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. An even-handed assessment is that effective, visible and verifiable action against terrorist groups in the vicinity of Kashmir is an urgent necessity, so I welcome the
reports of Pakistan's intent in that regard. Obviously we recognise that verifying and sustaining those efforts will be vital.

It is also worth pointing out that much of the commentary in the immediate aftermath of 14 February was pessimistic, and both Prime Minister Modi of India and Prime Minister Imran Khan of Pakistan have shown statesmanlike qualities that were perhaps not expected by many commentators. It is still early days, and one recognises that the potentially escalatory events in Jammu earlier today mean we cannot be complacent, but the international community can be relieved that some of the very worst predictions of only two or three weeks ago have not come to pass. I very much hope that the two Premiers will show statesmanlike behaviour in trying to ensure a verifiable change of heart on the ground.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank the Minister for early sight of his statement. I also thank him for his work and particularly for the work of Foreign and Commonwealth Office officials, which is often overlooked. I join colleagues on both sides of the House in our unequivocal condemnation of terror attacks.

We are dealing with two nuclear-armed states, which concerns us all and means this is a global problem, not just a regional problem. De-escalation is critical, and obviously we welcome the return of the Indian pilot. I welcome the Minister's work on that de-escalation. There is a concern about the role of non-state actors that could not care less about the nuclear element—that concerns us, and obviously it concerns the Minister, too. It would be interesting to get his further thoughts on that.

India and Pakistan have good friends the length and breadth of the United Kingdom, and I welcome the Minister's remarks about the UK's readiness to support the peace process should India and Pakistan require and want that support. This role should not begin and end with the FCO. If we are looking at a long-term solution, we must look to our engagement with diaspora communities and to the fantastic ongoing work that some tremendous non-governmental organisations—many of them funded by the FCO—and others are doing. I highlight the groundbreaking work of some of the Scottish NGOs in providing a space in Scotland for peacebuilding activities, and I know the Minister has taken that on board, too.

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. He is right to say that there is a role to be played by bodies other than the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. He will appreciate that a lot of work goes on, particularly in Pakistan, where the biggest Department for International Development budget goes. Some of that work is too sensitive to bring up on the Floor of the House, as he will understand. In addition, the Department for International Trade plays a role, and technology is becoming increasingly important to both India and Pakistan. I am well aware from my own speeches to diaspora communities from both the Pakistani and Indian side that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has an important role to play. Indeed, when I was in Mumbai, on a pre-arranged visit that ended up being at a fortuitous time in diplomatic terms, I had conversations about FinTech initiatives that take place between India and the UK. It is also worth pointing out that there is a fledgling but important technology industry in Pakistan, and we have tried to encourage our Pakistani diaspora to play an important role in that.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I particularly welcome the proactive way in which the Minister has brought this statement to the House. I do so for two reasons, the first of which is that I thought I detected a slight evolution in the Government's position and perhaps willingness to react to a demand from India and Pakistan to get involved. I do not particularly wish to press him on it, in case it proves to be a will-o'-the-wisp, but if I did correctly sense an evolution in the position, I am extremely grateful for that. The second reason is the one highlighted by the Opposition Front Bencher, which is that Kashmiri people in the UK and doubtful across the world have long felt neglected. They have felt that the international community has not paid attention to their human rights. If this is not the moment to escalate this issue in the minds of the international community, when will we ever do it? I welcome this statement but I ask the Minister to make sure the international community pays attention.

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for that. I am well aware of the work he does with a significant Kashmiri population in his constituency, and I have had a chance to meet some of the main community leaders there. I would not wish him to think there has been too much of an evolution of the Government policy, but what I have seen, having spoken at great length to our high commissioners in Islamabad and New Delhi, is a recognition that one area where we can and will assist, as we have done, is through the breadth of our diplomatic knowledge on the ground. We are able to have lines of communication open with diplomats, politicians and the military on both sides, which we hope will enable us to assist, but it would be wrong to assume that we are in any way going to try to put our own template or mediate there. I would not want the House to be in any doubt about the huge amount of work that goes on in our diplomatic community, which will continue.

I know that my hon. Friend takes the Kashmiri issue very seriously and he is right to say that this is perhaps an important international wake-up call, when progress can be made. We are perhaps reluctant to make a comparison with what happened in Northern Ireland, but the single worst attack on civilians there, in Omagh, in 1998, finally became the moment when many, not only in Northern Ireland but in surrounding countries, thought that something fundamentally had to change. That was the path towards the Good Friday agreement.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): I value the Minister coming here to give us this statement and I thank him for that. However, I am struggling with the fact that although we rightly hear about terrorism and how Pakistan needs to get rid of all the terrorism, I do not hear—and I want to hear—about the Kashmiri people. We do not hear about the fact that we have illegally occupied territory, and people who have been persecuted for years and years. There is no end in sight for those people at the heart of all of this. We are not talking
about that. We are not talking about the Indian armed forces doing what they are doing, and blinding people. We are not talking about the resurgence of all the terrors put upon these people. What really alarms me is that while we are talking about Pakistan playing its role, we have seen a Prime Minister in India who is using the conflict to electioneering and for his election purposes. What have our Government done? Have we made any representations to the Prime Minister of India about not using this conflict for electioneering purposes?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Lady for that. She will appreciate, and we have very much noted, the concerns across Kashmir raised in the report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in June 2018. It made firm recommendations for both India and Pakistan to consider. Even eight days ago, I was not quite aware of just how much work goes on. I alluded in my statement to the work on child education. When I was in Pakistan at the end of 2017, I went to Mardan in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, which at that stage was the stronghold of Imran Khan’s party. I saw the terrific amount of work that was going on in trying to develop trust-based policing, similar to what we have here in the UK, rather than the police being a police “force”. There was also a real commitment to education, particularly girls’ education. These things go on throughout Pakistan. Some of them are quite sensitive and I cannot go into great detail here.

One very much hopes there will be an ongoing de-escalation and culming of passions, but later in the year we will have a leadership week at the Foreign Office, when our high commissioners in India and Pakistan will both be here, so it might be useful to have the all-party group on Kashmir come in. I hope that people will recognise that some of what will be said will be a little sensitive, so I cannot go into deep detail on this on the Floor of the House, but that might be a useful little sensitive, so I cannot go into deep detail on this on the Floor of the House—I am well aware that the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) speaks in that regard. That might be the case, as it would give all Members a little more idea of just how much work goes on in Kashmir, some of which is difficult at this stage to avow.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I very much welcome the tone of the Minister’s statement, and that of what was said by the shadow Minister and by the Scottish National party spokesperson. The sight of two nuclear-armed nations firing on each other was clearly frightening, and the de-escalation that has happened since is welcome. Can the Minister reassure me about the work that will be done to maintain the communication, particularly between the two militaries that sit both sides of the line of control? In London, at the Royal College of Defence Studies, we can see members of both those nations’ armed forces working and participating together, and building up friendships and relationships. This should not be impossible and it is certainly something we could help to facilitate.

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for what he has said, because he is right: our defence capability here involves a significant number of leading figures in both the Pakistani and Indian military having come out of Sandhurst and having been trained here. That is one aspect of UK soft power, as having these sorts of institutions allows alumni to maintain contact in the future. We will do all we can to keep as many lines of communication open as possible. One does not perhaps recognise until such incidents occur just how important developing the soft power of those connections is, both for the UK’s purpose and for countries caught in the sort of problems faced in Kashmir.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Ind): I welcome the tone and content of the Minister’s statement and of the remarks made by the Labour Front Bench. That is very important at this time, when, as the Minister said, there has today been a terrorist attack on a bus stand in Jammu with a grenade. I understand that it has killed at least one person and left three more in a serious condition—apparently, 28 people were injured. This is the third attack on a bus stand in Jammu in the past year. Clearly, there are people in the region who wish to create tension, conflict and all-out war between India and Pakistan for their own reasons. This is a time for all voices in this country—in this Parliament and in diaspora communities—to come together to tone down the rhetoric and work for long-term, difficult political solutions.

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he said. He is absolutely right that it is incumbent on us all, as responsible Members of Parliament, to do all that we can to try to tone down the rhetoric, which was at a very high level at some points. He asked me last week about the Kargil war. I very much hope he will take up my offer and come to the Foreign Office. It would be useful to learn a little more because, as I say, one thing one learns quickly in Foreign Office and diplomatic affairs is that very few problems are entirely novel and we can always learn from perspectives on the past. The hon. Gentleman had an important role to play in the Foreign Affairs Committee at the beginning of the new Labour time, when Robin Cook was the Foreign Secretary.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for coming back to the House to update us on this situation. He will recall that in his comments to me last Wednesday he made a pledge to the people of Walthamstow and, indeed, to the people of this country, that in his conversations with both the Pakistani and Indian representatives he would raise explicitly the question of UN investigations into human rights in Kashmir. Will he update us on the conversations he has had on human rights and whether he has been able to use Britain’s influence to persuade them to co-operate with those investigations so that the people of Kashmir can finally have some justice?

Mark Field: We are working together on this. There have been a lot of other priorities, but I very much took on board the concerns expressed. As I mentioned earlier in answer to a previous question, we obviously feel that, given the pretty robust report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, with its own recommendations, we want both India and Pakistan to ensure that they adapt their domestic laws in line with the international standards. It is clear that a lot of work will continue at the UN; I do not think there is any sense of complacency or of thinking we are by any means out of the woods in respect of these tensions.
The current mandate of the UN military observer group in India and Pakistan authorises it to observe developments relating to the observance of the 1971 ceasefire and to report to the Secretary-General. Obviously, any allegations of human rights abuses or violations are therefore a matter of deep concern under that mandate. We expect all countries to comply with the international obligations. We will continue to do a lot more on this issue at the UN. We are well aware, as the hon. Lady will be, that several countries, including Germany and Indonesia, that have strong interests in this issue, either for regional reasons or because of their trade and diaspora connections, are on the UN Security Council this year, and we will be working together with all those countries. It will take a little time. I am sorry that I do not have too much more to report from the past eight days, but a lot more will be going on in the months to come.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The Minister has been most assiduous and thorough in his replies to questions, but—

Mark Field: I think I know where this is going.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The Minister knows what is coming next. We have a lot of business to get through today, so I think the House would now appreciate rather shorter answers.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I join the unanimous condemnation of these callous terrorist attacks and underline, as I think the Minister would, that the matter of Kashmir will be resolved only when India and Pakistan put the interests of Kashmiris centre stage.

I was hoping the Minister would clarify one point in relation to his statement. He referred to the fact that Pakistan’s actions need to be “urgent, sustained, credible and transparent”, but it is not clear to me whether he believes that to be the case, so will he confirm that? Will he also confirm what further action the UK Government may be able to take with Pakistan in future on tackling terrorism?

Mark Field: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. There is a clear intent from the Pakistani authorities to ensure that things are going to be verifiable and transparent, as I have pointed out. That will obviously be tested in time, but we have felt that Prime Minister Imran Khan has taken a positive stance, recognising our concerns about terrorist-related organisations on the ground in Pakistan. Again, we stand ready to work with the international community to try to ensure that any terrorist organisations on either side of the divide that would do harm to Kashmiri’s interests and to Kashmiri people are kept at bay.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I thank the Government for the steps they have taken to de-escalate the tension between Pakistan and India. The world cannot afford for these two nuclear countries to go to war. We all want to ensure the safety and human rights of the people of Kashmir. It is disappointing that the Minister did not say a single word on human rights in his three-page statement. Does he agree that there is a role for the United Nations and the other independent parties to monitor and report on alleged human rights abuses? The Indian Government have locked up hundreds of Kashmiri leaders. Does the Minister agree that India must remove restrictions on the Hurriyat leadership and accept that Kashmiris are the third party in this conflict?

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman knows that I cannot go as far as to satisfy him on what he said about the idea of Kashmir being a third party. We do not recognise the notion of government of Kashmir, for the obvious reasons we have pointed out. On human rights, I referred in my response to the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) to what we are doing at the UN level. It is important to recognise that we will continue to make representations, as we have in the past, to try to ensure that there is a proper, verifiable process for concerns about human rights, wherever they come from, and I accept that they come predominantly from the Pakistani side about what is happening in Indian-administered Kashmir. We will continue to make strong representations in that regard.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Many of us were appalled by the despicable terrorist attack in Pulwama, but it was also awful to see reprisals against entirely innocent Kashmiri people in India. Along with my Slough constituents, I was heartened to see various Sikh groups in the neighbouring Punjab and human rights organisations elsewhere stand up for and protect Kashmiris living in their neighbourhoods. Will the Minister continually make it clear to his Indian counterparts that although we understand their anger, they must ensure that innocent people are not harmed in response?

Mark Field: I can confirm that in my conversation with Foreign Secretary Gokhale in New Delhi last week I brought up that very point, and we shall continue to do so.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I join other Members in our unanimous condemnation of terrorism in all its forms. I welcome the Minister’s efforts to de-escalate this very dangerous situation. I also welcome the efforts of all people on all sides who continue to voice with reason the message of de-escalation, peace and stability in the region. In particular, I note the Pakistani Government and Imran Khan’s real gesture of peace in the release of the captured Indian pilot.

At the heart of this issue continue to be the sons and daughters of Kashmir. Tragically, I did not hear anywhere in the Minister’s statement the outright condemnation of the continued human rights violations. Just this morning, constituents have given me reports of ceasefire violations in the Bhimber, Kotli and Samahni districts that have left people injured and many others running and fleeing. I urge the Minister to demand an urgent end to the violations of the ceasefire and to urge the Indian Government, as Pakistan has done, to allow the international community to come together and act as mediators to allow an end to the human rights violations, and to allow self-determination.

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point. I am doing my best to de-escalate some of the passions and tensions even on the Floor of the
House. As I said last week, I very much admire the hon. Gentleman’s real sense of passion. He should not think that we do not express the concerns about human rights violations, but one concern is that using the word “condemn” is not enough; we want to try to do something more constructive. Condemning is simply words; I hope the hon. Gentleman recognises that a lot of action is also taking place in both Islamabad and New Delhi, and we shall continue to do that work.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I, too, welcome the tone of these exchanges on what can be a tense subject matter and what has been a very tense situation. One problem that causes terrorism all around the world, and certainly in this area, is information and misinformation. Many Members have called for monitoring by an honest broker, the UN, in Kashmir. It could not be one-way thing. Of course we do not support human rights violations, but one concern is that using the word “condemn” is not enough; we want to try to do something more constructive. Condemning is simply words; I hope the hon. Gentleman recognises that a lot of action is also taking place in both Islamabad and New Delhi, and we shall continue to do that work.

Mark Field: The issue of disinformation, which the hon. Lady rightly mentions, is a global phenomenon, due in part to the nature of social media. It is something that we will try to address. At the very least, we will try to corral the international community with a conference on press freedom in July, in which this will be one of the issues that will emerge.

The trust that has been built up over the years within our diplomatic network genuinely assisted in keeping open the lines of communication between Indian and Pakistani counterparts during the fraught weeks since 14 February. We can be very proud of it. At a time when so much of our energy and attention is on Brexit disputes, we have in the Foreign Office individuals who are working hard to do their best to ensure that, when there are flashpoints such as those that have happened in Kashmir, we can utilise as much of our diplomatic network’s muscle as possible to bring sides together. We can all be proud of that, but equally, we are not complacent and we will continue to work very hard to ensure that that de-escalation and the sense of calm that has come into place over the past couple of weeks are maintained.

Windrush Generation and the Home Office

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE

Select Committee Statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I will briefly remind the House of the fairly new procedure. Meg Hillier will speak on her subject for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of her statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and call Ms Hillier to respond to them in return. Members can expect to be called only once. Interventions should be questions, and should be brief. Ministers on the Front Bench may take part in the questioning.

1.22 pm

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to speak briefly on what is our 82nd report of this parliamentary Session, which looked at the Windrush generation and the Home Office. We asked the National Audit Office to look into this issue when it became apparent that a large number of British citizens and residents had lost jobs, homes, benefits and access to healthcare as a result of errors in the Home Office. We then took evidence from those who represented people who were victims of this and from the victims themselves, and we challenged Home Office officials about how they handled the matter. That is what our report covers.

We looked into what led to the Windrush scandal and how the support that was set up to help those affected is working. We also flagged up concerns about the future and laid down a number of recommendations for the Home Office, which are to be responded to through the normal Treasury minutes process and in other responses by certain deadlines.

What we discovered was that the Home Office failed to understand the real-life impact of policies that it was implementing. There was a group of people with citizenship and residency rights who were badly affected—people who were legally in the country with citizenship prior to 1973 when citizenship was granted automatically to many citizens, including those from the Caribbean Commonwealth. By changing the rules, the Government created huge problems for many people, but appeared unaware of that. I will come on to the warning signs that they missed in a moment. Those people, as I said, lost jobs and lost housing. Some went on holiday to the country in which they or their parents had been born, and were refused readmission to the UK, and others were deported.

The Home Office was warned about these problems and about the potential impact in 2014 through countless individual cases raised by Members of Parliament and by others working for some of the individuals concerned. Caribbean Ministers also raised these issues from 2016. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), who did so much to raise the profile of this issue. Our job as a Committee is not just to look at what went wrong. It is important that the Minister is here to listen to what went wrong so that lessons can be learned. Most of our recommendations are about what can be learned for the future.
Since the failure of this system, the Government have set up a Windrush scheme. Although it has achieved much—people can ring up and speak to an individual—it has certainly not helped everybody as it should have done. The urgent hardship fund that the Government established took eight months to set up. One of the concerns that we had as a Committee was that people had lost their jobs, and therefore their livelihoods and their homes, and so had to borrow money off friends. The lack of urgent funding was a real issue. We are pleased that the Government have now set up the scheme, but we think that there is more to be done. As we speak and as our report was published, there is no compensation scheme yet established, and we are a year on from that. It would be helpful to hear the Government’s response in that regard. I am sure that the whole House is hanging on what that compensation scheme will look like. This is also a generation of people who are not getting any younger. Some of them have already died waiting for a resolution.

Let me go through a number of our concerns. The first is that, although the Department has reviewed all 11,800 cases of people from the Caribbean who may be affected, we understand that there are around 160,000 cases from other Commonwealth countries that have been not reviewed by the Home Office. It is not the policy of the Home Office at this stage to review them. We are concerned about that, because there are many people from other Commonwealth nations who are affected, or could be affected, by this, and it is important that the Government understand that, get on top of it and make sure that others are not affected.

There is a big systemic issue in the Home Office. I speak as someone who, although Chair of the Committee now, was in the past a Minister in the Home Office, in part dealing with immigration. Under several Governments there have been poor systems, poor data and poor information about people, but this Government set great store by their Atlas programme, which is their new software system to deal with immigration matters. We as a Committee are clear that, on its own, a new software programme does not solve matters. We have to make sure that, in the first place, the right data is being put in. We want to make sure that the Government are focused on sorting out those systemic issues, and we have made a number of recommendations on which we expect the Government to come back to us with a response over the next six to 12 months.

As well as Commonwealth citizens, there are also lessons that could be applied to those going through the European Union registration scheme in the hope that the Government can stave off a similar crisis. At the moment, our European Union citizens have until the end of this month to register as resident in this country. That is a fast-paced programme. After that date, it is important that anyone who has not got the right paperwork is caught by the Home Office so that their existing rights, which have been guaranteed by the Government, are protected and that they do not hit problems with employment and other services if they have to provide certain information that they do not have. It is a digitally focused system, so there are real lessons there for the Government, and we are keen to hear from them how they will make sure that those citizens are protected because of the lessons that they have learned from the Windrush scheme.

In summary, the Home Office has very much focused on processes—it introduced new rules, which, in turn, led to different processes—but it has not taken a bigger-picture view of the impact that those processes and the problems have, if not resolved, on real people’s lives. When someone loses their job and their livelihood there is a long-term impact. These issues were flagged up to the Home Office by many of us in this House, by many agencies and by Governments. This report now flags up some serious issues for the Government to respond to, and we look forward to their response.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I am surprised that there are not more problems with an interest in this subject. This is a very useful report, as it demonstrates how deeply embedded the hostile environment still is in the Home Office and how much further there is to travel. It also shows the need for far-reaching cultural change.

I wish to pick up on recommendation 5, on the need to extend the review beyond Caribbean Commonwealth citizens. I wonder whether the Committee discussed quite how wide ranging that should be. In particular, I wonder whether the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee is aware of the situation of the Chagossian community—the Chagos islanders—who were forced from their homes in the Commonwealth in the 1960s, many of whom have made their homes here in the United Kingdom. Getting citizenship for them, and for the future generations that have come after them, has been very difficult. The least that can be done to demonstrate that there is a change to the hostile environment would be to grant these people the citizenship that they deserve.

Meg Hillier: Our role as a Committee is not to dictate or comment on the exact details of Government policy or whether the Government are making the right policy, but to examine whether that policy is working. It is very clear in law that if people arrived from certain countries to the UK before 1973, they automatically gained citizenship, and others had rights to residency. We are saying loud and clear to the Government that other people from the Commonwealth are in this group, and it is not good enough just to expect them to find access to what is badged “the Windrush scheme”, because that may not mean as much to people from Canada, Australia, Nigeria, Ghana or wherever.

In our recommendations, we have urged the Government to actively reach out—to assess the cases that they have on their files, but also to encourage people to apply. Some of these people may now be in their countries of origin, so there is an international aspect to the issue. Just as some people went back to the Caribbean on holiday and could not come back into this country, there may be people in the same situation in other Commonwealth countries. It is absolutely imperative that the Government deal with this matter before it becomes the next big scandal.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I congratulate the Public Accounts Committee on this important report. Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the most important sentences in the report is the one that says that “while the Department has reviewed 11,800 Caribbean cases, around 160,000 non-Caribbean Commonwealth cases remain unreviewed”? What does she advise the Government to do? These people cannot simply be ignored.
Meg Hillier: Absolutely. As my right hon. Friend and I know, there are probably more citizens affected by the issue in our own borough—perhaps this goes beyond my remit as Chair of the Public Accounts Committee—who are from the wider Commonwealth than from the Caribbean. I am glad to see that the Immigration Minister is in her place to hear this statement. As I said in response to the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), it is important that the Government really get a grip on this issue and take a proactive approach to publicising the support that is available. If people are legally entitled to support and protection, it is absolutely right that the Home Office ensures that they have access to it, and that they know their rights.

The Government have set up a scheme for Windrush—there is some architecture in place now—so it is really important that this message goes out to the wider Commonwealth. This issue has been raised with me since before this report and our inquiry; many across the wider Commonwealth are concerned. It is important that the Government deal with this situation more effectively, as we have recommended.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Has the Committee looked at compensation for the Windrush people? A number of them in Coventry have been a bit concerned, to say the least.

Meg Hillier: As I said earlier, it is not our job to recommend how the Government do things. They have promised to deliver a compensation scheme, and my hon. Friend can rest assured that my Committee will be keen to look at that when it is unveiled—as, no doubt, will the National Audit Office. Our concern was that, a year on, there is no further information about the compensation scheme while people are waiting.

Although it is beyond the remit of what we were looking at, a compensation scheme could involve a formula or there could be bespoke compensation. It is obviously for the Government to decide exactly how that goes ahead. Once a compensation scheme is established, no doubt many of us will be scrutinising it—including, quite possibly, the Public Accounts Committee.

BILL PRESENTED

Postnatal Check-ups (Mental Health) Bill
Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Wera Hobhouse, supported by Christine Jardine, Layla Moran, Rosie Duffield, Rosie Cooper, Catherine West, Tom Brake, Dr David Drew, Tim Loughton, Jo Swinson and Steve McCabe, presented a Bill to require routine six week National Health Service check-ups for new mothers to include mental health assessments and advice; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March, and to be printed (Bill 352).
Mrs Miller: I thank my hon. Friend and fellow member of the Select Committee for raising that point. I am married to a lawyer who works for the firm Kingsley Napley, where more than 50% of the partners are women. However, I urge my hon. Friend to look at some of the other law firms in the City of London that do not have the same proportion of women at the top, and to encourage his daughter to look for those good employers so that she, too, can progress right the way through to the top.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Could the right hon. Lady tell us what progress has been made regarding the pay gap between women and men?

Mrs Miller: The hon. Gentleman raises a really important point. I think that the biggest amount of progress has been in the Government making companies publish their gender pay gap; for the first time ever, the pay gap has become an issue that is on the agenda of businesses throughout the country. However, in answer to the hon. Gentleman’s question, there has not been nearly enough progress. Although the gender pay gap has all but evaporated for women under 30, for older women it is alive and well, and we need to resolve it. I will come to that issue later in my speech.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), I believe in equality of opportunity. We need to continue to look for ways of ensuring equality of opportunity for women in our communities. As women we are resilient, but we are so resilient that we sometimes need to stop and appreciate the blatant discrimination that still pervades our lives every single day, and which still denies some women the level playing field of opportunity. Too many women’s confidence is sapped—their career even destroyed—by bullying and sexual harassment at work. Forty per cent. of women in this country, and millions more around the world, suffer sexual harassment.

That issue was well highlighted this week by the day of action that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) and I hosted, when women from across the country, supported by CARE International, came into Parliament to lobby Members of Parliament to support the new International Labour Organisation global convention, which will outlaw sexual harassment and abuse at work in every country in the world, if it gets the support of their Governments.

Discrimination is still blatant because so much of the enforcement of the laws that we have passed in the UK is not working as we would want it to. In the Government’s new good workplace report, they set out the importance of enforcement of workplace rights, and they are right to do so. However, I urge the Minister for Women also to look at the enforcement of anti-discrimination laws and the laws that pertain to health and safety, as well as others that are being looked at as part of the good workplace report. Legislation puts enforcement powers for those anti-discrimination laws into the hands of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, but if it is not exercising those powers, we should give them to somebody who does. No one should be prepared to stand by and watch more than 50,000 women a year leave their jobs simply because they are pregnant, even though we already have laws in place to prohibit that.

One in eight women in this country want to start their own business, often as a way to create their own business culture, yet they find that just 9% of funding for start-ups goes to women, despite women-led businesses delivering double the returns on investment for financial backers. When a woman looks to Parliament to fix the problem, she might see a very strong Prime Minister admired for her resilience, but on these green Benches—well, perhaps not today, but usually—she will see that just one in three MPs are women. As I have said, the most important way to build in a resilient equality between men and women is through women’s economic empowerment—women’s full participation in work, including here.

The truth is that many of the barriers in women’s workplaces, including those that remain here, are in need of reform. With regard to the laws that we are so proud of having passed in this place, the reality is that a lack of enforcement on the ground often makes them worse than useless for many women. Most women do not work in the City of London, in large accountancy or law firms or in City institutions that may have modernised their approaches. Our constituents face a very different workplace, often still stuck in the ’70s, with presenteeism, a long hours culture, a lack of flexible working, employers who routinely use non-disclosure agreements to cover up discrimination, and management who look down on dads who want to take parental leave to share in the care of the newest members of their family.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I know that the right hon. Lady’s Committee has been doing a lot of work on non-disclosure agreements and she has very much led the charge on that. It is a very complex legal issue, but does she agree that a starting point could well be to compel companies legislatively to publish the number of NDAs that they use, the reason that they use them, and how many they use each year?

Mrs Miller: The hon. Lady brings up a very important possible solution, which our Committee will certainly look at. We have been struck by how many companies and organisations do not use NDAs at all, particularly the Government. Some people have said that the reason the Government—or the civil service—do not use them any more is the oversight of Ministers and the media, so, as she says, transparency may well be a way forward.

We have to shake free from the notion that a modern workplace will cost too much to deliver and be too much of a burden on business, because the fact that millennial dads tell us that they would rather downgrade their jobs than take a promotion or a pay rise because they cannot balance their family and work commitments indicates that productivity is really under threat. With more than 1 million economically inactive mums not working because there are not the jobs that allow them to look after their kids and work as well, we have a real problem to tackle. As labour becomes in shorter supply after we leave the EU, it is a problem that we cannot afford to continue to sweep under the carpet. We need modernisation and reform.

That message of modernisation is for this place, too. One of the very first reports by the Women and Equalities Committee was on women in the House of Commons. I was struck by the plans that all political parties have in place to address the under-representation of women in
Parliament. The proof of the pudding will obviously be at the next election as to how many get elected. There is no way of disguising the real appetite for change among the parties, but can we identify the same appetite for change with regard to Parliament itself? Can we be so sure, when the political parties are recruiting a new generation of female MPs, that they will be arriving in a place that they want to stay in, or will it still look as though it is in a time warp?

Very good work has been done by Professor Sarah Childs, thanks to Mr Speaker’s significant commitment to modernising this place. He put his money where his mouth is and commissioned her to produce a report in which she painted a picture of what a good Parliament looks like. Some of those measures have been taken up—in particular, proxy voting for parents with new children. I note that Madam Deputy Speaker was in the Chair when that change to Standing Orders went through; we thank her for her support. We do not now routinely sit through the night, and there are some rudimentary family facilities in Parliament. The crèche is important. However, what someone whose children are beyond crèche age needs as a parent is certainty about what they are doing day by day, so that they can plan what they might be doing on a particular day. That certainty is wholly lacking in this place, as evidenced by this debate, which should have started about two hours ago. We need to do more to make sure that parents, whether they are commuters or need to get back to their constituencies to look after their children, have certainty as to when we will be sitting here. I can see one or two hon. Members nodding vigorously at these comments.

Hannah Bardell: Does the right hon. Lady agree that implementing a process such as the Scottish Parliament’s set decision time, together with electronic voting, which would seriously reduce the amount of time that we waste in this place, would be two very positive steps forward?

Mrs Miller: The hon. Lady is probably pressing me a bit too far on electronic voting, but I definitely think that the Scottish Parliament has a very sensible way of organise it. People know that voting will take place at a particular time, so they do not lose that opportunity to get together, to see each other and to have all the important conversations that they need to have as a body of people, but they do it at a regular time during the day. We can stay here until 1 o’clock in the morning debating all we like, but it should not be at the expense of people’s family life. One colleague has told me about the real problems of not being able to get home at night for her teenage children. We are neglecting this at our peril, because such good women will vote with their feet and not necessarily stand for re-election at the next election.

This is partly why the Women and Equalities Committee has decided to set up a Sub-Committee to scrutinise the implementation of a recent report, “UK Gender-Sensitive Parliament Audit 2018”, published by a group of MPs including my hon. Friends the Members for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) and for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), the hon. Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker) and the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), as well as Members in the other place. The report looks at how we could make the House of Commons a better place to be a female MP. Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making some very powerful arguments on the way that this place could change to make it a better place for female MPs and mothers, but does she agree that such changes would be good for fathers as well? I have had quite a few conversations with dads with young children about how difficult they find some of Parliament’s practices and hours.

Mrs Miller: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. Many of our colleagues have young children and have partners who are working; they have the same pressures on them as their constituents. A gender-sensitive Parliament would be good for everybody. We have lacked to date a process and procedure to take these really good ideas and make change in this place. Change is glacially slow, and we have to change that and make these things happen. The Sub-Committee has not yet formed and met, but it will look at the strong recommendations made by the “UK Gender-Sensitive Parliament Audit”, which include increasing the predictability of parliamentary business, reforming the sitting hours, eliminating bullying and harassment, and implementing the new behaviour code and grievance procedures—the list goes on. I hope that Members will agree with what I hope will be a change to the Standing Orders, so that our Committee can scrutinise what not only the Government but Parliament are doing on these issues.

As a House of Commons, we have not grasped this issue in the way we need to and in the way that most modern Parliaments have. I am immensely proud to be a Member of Parliament and to be the first ever woman to represent my constituency. Indeed, I am still the only woman to ever represent a constituency in north Hampshire, although we have quite a few incredibly powerful women elsewhere in Hampshire, one of whom was just sitting on the Front Bench. It is our responsibility to ensure that the women who follow us have more opportunity and economic empowerment and that our daughters—wherever they live, and whatever their race or religion—have the same opportunity as our sons.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Before we proceed, I am afraid that I will have to introduce an initial time limit of seven minutes, to ensure that everybody gets an equal chance to make all the important points that have to be made. I would also like to welcome to the Gallery of the Chamber Stacey Abrams from the USA. It is good to have an international input to our proceedings. Ms Abrams was the Democratic candidate for Governor of Georgia and the House of Representatives minority leader, and we are delighted to be observed by her this afternoon.

1.52 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): In the first International Women’s Day debate I attended, I promised to read out the names of the women killed by men since the last International Women’s Day. Today I will honour that promise. Over the years, I have had the pleasure of meeting the families of these women, who were grateful that their loved ones were being remembered. I read these names not only to continue to highlight
how male violence can terrorise ordinary women’s lives, but to pay tribute to these women and those who did not survive and give them the opportunity to be heard. The reason that these women are no longer with us is that they are hard to see, hard to hear and hard to believe. I could not do this without the brilliant work of the Counting Dead Women project and Karen Ingala Smith, who tirelessly records the lives of these women. The first name I will read out is that of a woman who was murdered just days after I rose to my feet here in this Chamber a year ago.

Their names are: Jennifer Rogers; Heather Whitbread; Michelle Savage; Diane Jones; Jenny Cronin; Leyla Mtumwa; Ourania Lambrou; Tanesha Melbourne; Tracy Stonehouse; Alexis Flynn; Lesley Potter; Viktorija Sokolova; Margaret Howlett; Maryna Kavaliauskas; Angela Craddock; Samantha Clarke; Jennifer Morgan; Julie Hunt; Hollie Kerrell; Elizabeth Lacey; Fiona Fisher; Faye Caliman; Nicola Roberts; Onesee Khatoon; Jessica Patel; Rosina Coleman; Bernadette Green; Sophie Cavanagh; Angela Conoby; Christina Abbotts; Laura Mortimer; Denise Rosser; Joanne Bishop; Jill Hibberd; Andra Hilitanu; Molly Frank; Sofija Kaczan; Tina Cantello; Marie Gibson; Gitana Matukevičienė; Tracy Patsalides; Gita Suri; Klarissa-Charlene Faith; Shuren Ma; Samantha Toms; Lorna Myers; Stela Domador-Kuzma; Patricia Franks; Dawn Burgess; Gina Ingle and her son; Riasat Bi; Katerina Makunova; Lesley Davies; Sheila Thomas; Lucy McG Hugh; Sam Eastwood; Karen Peter; Kelly Franklin; Katherine Kemp; Tracey Evans; Marie Walker; Simonne Kerr; Barbara Davison; Kaltoun Saleh; Carole Harrison; Sharon Perrett; Ranee Ou deh; Khaola Saleem; Celia Levitt; Julie Owens; Joan Hoggett; Memunatu W arne; K ylie Dembrey; Susan Gyde; Kay Martin; Cristina Magda-Calanca; Frances Hubbard; Sandra Znijan; Margaret Harris; Sharon Harris; Jeanna Maher; Glenda Jackson; Avan Najm aede; Natalie Saunders; Sarah Wellgreen; Nazia Al i; Teresa Garner; Lynn Forde; Mavis Brant; Sheena Jackson; Fiona McDonald; Natalie Smith; Tanseem Sheikh; Sanaa Muh ummad; Pauline Kilkenny; Katarzyna Paszek; Maureen Watkins; Jacqueline Allen; Samantha Gosney; Karen Cleary-Brown; Barbara Findley; Grace Millane; Maureen Whale; Sally Cavender; June Knight; Keely McGrath; Poppy Devey-Waterhouse; Lana Owen; Marissa Aldrich; Parwin Quriashi; Angela Mittal; June Jones; Joy Morgan; Lisa Jane McCarthy; Charlotte Huggins; Jay Edmunds; Simbiso A retha Moula; Sarah Ashraf; Asma Begum; Luz Isaza Villegas; Leanne Ounsworth; Christy Walsh; Alison Hunt; Mary Annie Sowerby; Regina Marilyn Paul; Margaret Smythe; Mary Page; Rosie Darbyshire; Aliny Mendes; and Sarah Henshaw.

I could feel the nervousness in the room that I would not finish reading the list within seven minutes. That is how we should feel every single minute of every day — nervous that one of our constituents will wake up dead. The fear and tension that we felt in our bodies that I would not get through the list and would be made to sit down is what victims of domestic violence feel every minute that they walk around their houses. The second they wake up in the morning, they feel frightened and have to walk on awkward eggshells all day long. These women need us in this place to hear their names and hear their stories, so that we can change and make it so that next year’s list might at least be a little bit shorter.

1.58 pm

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I would like to praise my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for a fantastic opening speech and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) for her hugely powerful speech.

Gender equality is a crucial agenda for the whole planet. The reality is that we simply will not fix the many challenges that the world faces today with half the world’s population locked out of being able to contribute to any of the solutions. It is five years since we held the Girl Summit in 2014, while I was Secretary of State for International Development. It was an international summit to use the UK’s role as a major aid investor to step up to the plate on gender equality. In doing so, we wanted to highlight two key issues that I felt did not get anywhere close to the level of attention domestically and internationally that they needed for the many women they affected: female genital mutilation, and early and forced marriage. It was all too easy for many people in Britain to think that those two issues were other countries’ problems. In fact, it turned out that they were actually ours as well. The Girl summit in 2014 was our attempt to try to provide some momentum not only to an international agenda that needed it, but, as I and the then Home Secretary—now the Prime Minister—felt, to a domestic agenda that needed it, too.

I am proud of what we have been able to do since. I wanted to say in this debate that I very much hope it will not be the last Girl summit this country hosts. I very much hope that, as UK aid steadily shifts, we can make sure it keeps at its heart the issue of tackling gender inequality. In the end, countries that are not able to use all their human capital simply will not be successful, whatever broader development programmes they have under way. It is now crucial that the UK plays its role in delivering the sustainable development goals, particularly goal 5 on gender equality. This country worked so hard to make sure that that goal had a list of issues to tackle that could transform the lives of women wherever they were in the world, which included the issues we campaigned on at the Girl summit.

Before I turn briefly to the domestic agenda, I want to finish talking about the international agenda by saying that I am proud of what UK aid does in helping other countries to achieve gender equality alongside the path our own is on. I do not accept that there is a choice to be made between an aid strategy in our national interest and an aid strategy in our global interest. Anyone who suggests that there is somehow such a choice is misunderstanding the fact that we live in a common world, where helping other countries escape from poverty is one of the best ways to ensure our own future as well as theirs. I would be very opposed to seeing what I think has been a very effective aid strategy under the Department for International Development subsumed into a Foreign Office one. Our aid strategy should be about pioneering work on things such as gender equality; it should not be used simply to curry favour with other countries around the world.

The other thing I want to say is that, since that Girl summit, many things have continued to change in the world, not least the issue of social media. I want to finish by looking at the aspect of gender equality in the context of that social media challenge. The reality is that, while social media platforms can be amazing platforms
for the voices of girls and women to be heard loud and clear, they will not prove to be successful platforms for any of that if those voices are just drowned out by trolling, abuse and the kind of domestic abuse that happens offline, sometimes with fatal effects, if it shifts on to the online world as well.

I very much join others in calling for more action to be taken in relation to the social media giants, and for Facebook and Google to step up to the plate to do more of what they can to combat this. It is interesting that when we look at some of the surveys by organisations such as Amnesty International, we see that they are completely shocking in relation to the impact of social media on women. Amnesty International’s research back in late 2017 showed that one in five women it polled said they had experienced abuse or harassment through social media. Of those, more than a quarter, shockingly, had received direct or indirect threats of physical or sexual violence, while 47% had experienced sexist or misogynistic abuse and nearly 60% said that they had no idea who the perpetrator was. Many MPs and colleagues in this House will know what it is like, as I do, to be targeted online purely because of the views we hold, which is totally unacceptable.

We can and should do much more about this. I think we need domestic action, and I would like to pay tribute to the many companies that are now actually stepping up to the plate and showing that they can use social media for a positive voice. For example, Avon has a fantastic campaign called “Stand4her”. There are brands such as Missguided, which has the #keeponbeingyou movement, which will do no more photoshopping; it will just use models as they are—all kinds of models. They will look as beautiful as they are in real life; they do not need any touching up or anything like that. Other brands include Emily Atack and #ITSjustgotreal, which says that “we will not be smoothing out any lines, wrinkles, lumps or bumps to sell you something that just is not real.”

That is the kind of leadership we need, but I would like to see it matched by our social media companies as well. If we can have stronger domestic action on this, we can perhaps, as we have on the international gender equality front, lead on this gender equality campaign too.

2.5 pm

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I am delighted to speak in this debate on my first International Women’s Day as a Member of this House. I just want to say that the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) reminds me that, when I was a teenager, my cousin was brutally raped and murdered. The speech was really powerful, and I just want to pay tribute to her for it. I would like to thank the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and Members across the House who supported the application for this debate, and the Backbench Business Committee for helping to facilitate it.

Today, I would like to celebrate some of the achievements and advancements women have made and highlight some of the challenges we still face. Last year marked 100 years since women gained the right to vote and to sit in the House of Commons. We marked the occasion with the brilliant 200 Women exhibition, which powerfully displayed the contribution women are making to this House daily.

We have also seen the rise of the Me Too movement, which has swept the globe. It has forced a long overdue reassessment of our treatment of and response to sexual harassment and abuse. We have seen the first conviction in a female genital mutilation case, which sends a strong message that this crime cannot be tolerated, and we have also seen the upskirting legislation. However, there is more to do, and I hope we can soon classify misogyny as a hate crime.

Within the Labour party, we have just launched important new sexual harassment procedures, which give victims access to an independent adviser throughout their case and support from the Rape and Sexual Abuse Support Centre. This is industry-leading practice, and is rightly being celebrated.

Although much can be celebrated, we are yet to achieve full gender equality for the women of the world. Recently, in a conversation with a friend of mine, she said, “We women have never won anything without a fight”—indeed, what is won without a fight?—and that is true. International Women’s Day is about all women, from all backgrounds and all ages, lifestyles and experiences.

This morning, I was delighted to meet two young women—16 and 17 years old—from the Defence for Children International Palestine Section, who are speaking up for their rights and are fighting for them, and rightly so, like those from the suffragettes to Rosa Parks, the women who blazed a trail in this House and the fantastic women in the Chamber today, including in the Gallery. I am pleased to say that some constituents of mine from Lewisham East are here. With all that said, in this day and age many women and girls do not have the ability to fight, but we who can fight must fight for them.

I will name a few areas in which much more needs to be done to reduce gender inequality: employment, gender pay, pensions, prisons and the need to eliminate period poverty. On employment, the female employment rate is still low compared with that for men. On gender pay, female pay is much lower than that of their male counterparts, and the median rate is up to £100 less. The reality of money in old age is far from equal, and I do not think anyone can disagree with that when we consider the WASPI women, who have been failed in their retirement funding. This should not be the legacy for many of our older British female population.

On prisons, according to the Prison Reform Trust, nearly one in three foreign national women in prison is serving a sentence for drug offences. That does not sound right. Sentencing guidelines should be reassessed to consider mitigating factors, such as evidence of coercion. Black British women are over-represented in prison, and that is overwhelmingly due to the socio-economic inequalities that arise from deprivation, disadvantage and discrimination.

The extent of period poverty is a national embarrassment, and socks, toilet paper and kitchen towels are some of the items being used by girls and women as sanitary products. Period poverty is on the rise, and one in 10 girls is unable to afford sanitary products each month. This issue is fundamental to equality for women, and the Government should abolish VAT on sanitary products and immediately explore ways to achieve universal, free access. We could start with our own house, and I am supporting the campaign to ensure that free sanitary products are available here.
A 2017 report from the World Economic Forum said that it could be another 100 years before the global equality gap between men and women disappears. I hope I speak for the whole House when I say that we cannot afford to wait that long. Such a responsibility should not be taken lightly by this Government, or any other.

2.10 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): When making her maiden speech 100 years ago Nancy Astor, the first woman to take her seat in this House, reassured the crowd of men around her. She said that Members should not be frightened and that “when Drake and Raleigh wanted to set out on their venturesome careers, some cautious person said, ‘Do not do it; it has never been tried before. You stay at home, my sons, cruising around in home waters’”—[Official Report, 24 February 1920; Vol. 125, c. 1623].

Like those other pioneers who set out from Plymouth before her, Nancy Astor charted a new course, and changed the world. Thanks to her, when I was growing up in the late 1980s I thought that being Prime Minister was a woman’s job. Thanks to her, I am standing here today, surrounded by talented female colleagues—I am glad to see that some male colleagues are also here supporting us. Also thanks to her, when I was elected my daughter said to me, “Mummy, are men allowed to be MPs?”

International Women’s Day is a chance to reflect on how far we have come, and to celebrate the achievements of women in all parts of the House. I pay tribute to the work of brilliant colleagues such as my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), who is the Mother of the House, and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) who made such a powerful speech a moment ago. My hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) does a fantastic job speaking up for women, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) referred to her own work on international development. My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachael Maclean) cannot be here today, but she has been a powerful campaigner for women during her time in this place.

As the Conservative party’s vice-chair for women, I will take a moment to speak about what my party does for women, and I suggest it is no coincidence that the first female MP and the first female Prime Minister were Conservatives. We believe that someone’s talents, rather than their identity, background or gender, should determine where they go in life, and that women should have the same choices and opportunities as men. I am a feminist because I am a Conservative, not in spite of that. The Conservative Government introduced mandatory gender pay gap reporting and the right to request flexible working, and they are tackling crimes that particularly target women, such as modern slavery and domestic violence. This Government are consulting on extending redundancy protection for pregnant women, and on stopping the use of non-disclosure agreements to cover up sexual harassment.

Our economic reforms have also supported women, with 1.6 million more women in work than in 2010, increases to the national living wage and personal allowance, and the extension of free childcare to 30 hours a week, which particularly benefits women. There has been great progress, but we all recognise that the job is far from done. For example, although the gender pay gap for full-time employees is close to zero for those aged 18 to 59, women’s careers and earning potential still take a hit after they have children. Fewer than 10% of FTSE 100 companies have a female CEO.

Unconscious bias and discrimination are still holding women back. Just last week a man told me that women do not want to stand for election because they would rather stay at home in the evening, and because men are the breadwinners and like to work hard—I had to pause for a moment in disbelief that such things are still being said, but it happened literally last week. I have lost count of the number of times people have asked me how I “manage” to be an MP and look after my children. It is as if that is some kind of incredible feat, as opposed to what women do day in, day out, when juggling childcare with being a Member of Parliament or any demanding career.

On this International Women’s Day I urge the Government to build on Nancy Astor’s legacy and go even further to make equal opportunity a reality for women. I wish to suggest practical actions on three fronts: reforming working practices, giving families greater choice in how to share caring responsibilities, and challenging the sexual stereotypes that prevent women from achieving their potential. That way we can create a society that works for everyone.

Women must have equal opportunities to succeed at work and gain financial security. Sexual harassment, which curtails women’s careers, must be stamped out. We must close the maternity pay gap. We know that when women reach their late 20s and early 30s their wages start to plateau. Not only do women earn less, but they also save less and hold fewer assets. By the age of 65 the average woman has just £13,000 in savings and under £36,000 in a pension—just one fifth of the average man’s pension at the same age. The Institute for Fiscal Studies puts that down to mothers working part time.

The 40 hours, five-days-a-week model that is still so pervasive in our country was designed to suit single-earner households and stay-at-home carers, but that no longer reflects how many people wish to organise their lives. The Government have introduced the right for employees to request flexible working, and they are considering placing a greater onus for that on employers. I think we should go further and ensure that all jobs can be flexible, unless proven otherwise.

I want to see more equal choices in modern families, because the great inequality between maternity and paternity rights makes it harder for women to participate in the workforce, and harder for fathers to spend time with their children. The take-up of shared parental leave is low, and there is no statutory option for partners to take more than two weeks’ leave without that affecting the mother’s entitlement. There is also a limit to the number of antenatal appointments that men can attend, and we must do more to enable fathers to be involved in their child’s life from day one.

Finally, we must end the social attitudes that prevent women from achieving their potential. To really tackle sexism in society we must understand, and undermine, its root causes. We must be unafraid to challenge outdated attitudes whenever we encounter them. We must be
forceful about what we will no longer accept, and we must finish the journey that Nancy Astor started 100 years ago.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. A lot of colleagues still wish to speak, so I will reduce the time limit to six minutes from now.

2.18 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Thank you Madam Deputy Speaker, and I wish everybody here and beyond a happy International Women’s Day.

Women’s day was celebrated for the first time 110 years ago in the United States in protest at the working conditions to which garment workers—mostly female—were subjected. Although we as a global society have made significant strides towards gender equality since then, it is important to acknowledge that issues regarding the workplace, and about violence towards and the subjugation of women, are nowhere close to being resolved.

As we have heard, in this place 100 years ago Viscountess Nancy Astor made history and became the first female Member of Parliament to take her seat. Countess Markievicz of Sinn Féin was, of course, the first woman to be elected to this place, although she never took her seat. Today 209 women sit in the House of Commons, and 206 women in the House of Lords, but there is still work to do.

Some challenges have merely evolved in nature. For example, over a six-month period in 2017, women MPs were sent nearly 26,000 abusive tweets—that point has already been touched on, and I hope that the Government will respond to it. We need to address anonymity on social media, and the need for a compulsory code of practice for social media publishers. Social media giants must recognise their responsibility and cease hiding behind the description of “platforms”. They publish and make money from this issue, and they have an effect on our democracy, and especially on female politicians. Today, 2.7 billion women live in countries where their employment choices are legally restricted because of their gender. In Bangladesh, 73% of female garment workers have witnessed or experienced workplace violence. And here in England, Wales, and Scotland over half of workers have experienced workplace violence.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. She is making a very powerful point. She will be aware that my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) and I are ambassadors for White Ribbon Scotland. Does she agree that it is very important to get more men to sign up and speak out about violence against women, and that they should sign the pledge that says: “never commit, condone or remain silent about violence against women in all its forms”?

That applies in Scotland, as well as in the other nations around the UK.

Liz Saville Roberts: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. What strikes me as a female politician is perhaps the risk of women talking about women’s issues and that in itself not generating status and attention. Of course, women’s issues are as much a matter for men as they are for women. That we are all here to discuss this matter is extremely significant.

Violence against women remains a major issue. Globally, one in three women will experience either physical partner violence or sexual violence in her lifetime. In 2017, 137 women across the world were murdered by a member of their own family every single day. Women and girls are routinely denied rights to their own bodies and lives. Some 9 million girls between the ages of 15 and 19 have been victims of forced sex in the past year alone. At least 200 million women and girls alive today are victims of female genital mutilation; 137,000 of them live in the UK.

There is still much to be done, but we should celebrate the progress we have made and the incredible women in our world today. Last year, Nadia Murad of Iraq—I was honoured to meet her two years ago; I am sure many others have, too—was awarded a Nobel peace prize for her work. She has amplified and raised the voice of the victim, not as a victim but as the voice of a survivor. That had so much impact and she very much deserved to receive the Nobel peace prize. Sinead Burke, in Ireland, passionately advocates for people with disabilities to be included in design considerations. Rachel Williams of Newport, Wales, works tirelessly for survivors of domestic abuse since becoming a survivor herself.

I will be brief, because there are many other people who want to speak, but I am proud of this point: the National Assembly for Wales, my home Parliament of course, has now just about reached gender parity, with women currently accounting for 47% of our Assembly Members. I am optimistic for the future ahead of us.

One other point I am very proud of—other Members have raised it—is that we can now actually discuss periods in Parliament and talk about period poverty. I will mention Councillor Elyn Stevens of Rhondda Cynon Taf, whose campaign has been successful in the establishment in the National Assembly for Wales of a £1 million fund to address period poverty in Wales. For a woman of my generation, even five years ago I would have been embarrassed to talk about it—I would have gone bright red—but now we can talk about it.

I would like to end on these famous words: “Here’s to strong women: may we know them, may we be them, may we raise them.”

At the same time, we must acknowledge that global power structures still exist which liberate some women—possibly us here—at the expense of others. We must therefore work towards liberation, equal opportunity and justice for women everywhere. Dydd Gwyl Rhnygwladol Menywed hapus i chi i gyd: happy International Women’s Day.

2.24 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): Over the past century, women’s voices have become louder. I am happy to add my voice to the brilliant speeches from all Members here today calling for further progress. I also thank my hon. Friend, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), for remembering those women who lost their lives in the past year due to domestic violence.

Today, women are more represented than ever before, but there is still so much to do to achieve proper gender balance in both the workplace and here in Parliament.
I believe the best way to shift this imbalance is through education and by example: supporting young girls to have the confidence and self-belief to break into sectors that are traditionally male-dominated. We know that girls are underrepresented in science, technology, engineering and maths subjects at school and in STEM jobs in the economy. Despite being 50% of the workforce, women account for less than 15% of the jobs in engineering and technology sectors, according to a recent report in The Guardian.

Eddie Hughes: Having started my life as a civil engineer, I realise just how unrepresented women are in the construction industry. I would like to praise the work of the National Association of Women in Construction, which is doing its very best to move the focus from gender to ability, to make sure we get the best people for the job, regardless of their gender.

Gillian Keegan: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I remember well myself being told at my comprehensive school in Knowsley that “Girls don’t do technical drawing courses”. We had to do needlework and home economics—until, that is, the headmaster met my mother.

It was National Apprenticeship Week this week and I met some fabulous young girls in the construction and technology industries. Alia Saddique, Olivia Dobell, ChyAnne Mwangi, ChyAnne Brown and Megan Whitbread are all blazing a trail and they were here in Parliament this week to tell us what they are doing to change things. And things are changing—earlier this week, I visited the University of East London to mark National Apprenticeship Week in my role as apprenticeship ambassador. On my tour of its hi-tech facilities, such as a computer-aided manufacturing room, I met a number of degree apprentices. Of the 14 students using the new technology, four were women—roughly 30%. Some progress is being made, although not enough.

Technology should be a massive enabler for women in the workplace and we must ensure that it is. Being able to use modern collaboration tools enables employees to work at home, participate in video conference calls, and work with other co-workers anywhere in the world. These trends in technology will enable women to become agile workers and achieve better life-work balance. I truly believe these developments are even more liberating and profound then anything we can do in this place. They will also help women who want to return to the workplace after a career break.

The importance of role models can never be overstated. You cannot be what you cannot see. We have many remarkable women leading the way in West Sussex: Susan Pyper, our lord lieutenant; Dianne Sheppard, who leads Chichester District Council; Louise Goldsmith, the leader of the county council; Katy Bourne, our police and crime commissioner; Kate Mosse, the famous author; Jane Longmore, the vice chancellor of Chichester University, and her deputy, Professor Catherine Harper; Sheila Legrave, who runs Chichester College; Dame Marianne Griffiths, the CEO of the Western Sussex Hospitals NHS Trust; and Sam Allen, the CEO of the Sussex Partnership Trust.

Building confidence and establishing good networks is a vital first step in achieving the empowerment of women in our society. Twenty years ago, in 1999, the Everywoman Network was established by two remarkable women, Maxine Benson and Karen Gill. Today the network has many thousands of members, and is well supported by both businesses and the public sector across all sectors of the economy. They run leadership programmes, networking and recognition events, and online mentoring services for women in the UK and beyond. I am proud to say that Karen Gill is a constituent of mine and, together with her co-founder Maxine, they are helping to ensure that the pipeline of female talent for leadership roles is growing stronger and stronger with every year.

Rightly, our efforts to better the lives of women and girls go beyond our shores. I am pleased that we are leading the global effort to reach girls across the world and give them an education. As we have seen with inspirational conviction from women like Malala, education is empowerment. I saw for myself the joy that learning brings to children in desperate situations when I visited a refugee camp in Tanzania last year. The children told me that they were working hard to become doctors, lawyers and leaders of the future. I believe it was knowing they were lucky to be learning that gave them that burning desire and hope for their future. I am pleased that our Government are targeting help towards the most marginalised girls around the world through the global challenges research fund. Those girls, who face multiple disadvantages, will hopefully be better educated, healthier, participate in the labour market and earn high incomes in the future.

It was former UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, who said:

“The world will never realise 100 per cent of its goals if 50 per cent of its people cannot realise their potential”. When we unleash the power of women, we can secure the future for all. On this International Women’s Day, we will redouble our efforts to unleash the power of women in our society. As Chichester-born Helena Morrissey said in the title of her most recent book, it is “A Good Time to be a Girl”.

2.30 pm

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): Tackling sexism in the workplace and employing more women is the key to making the world richer, more equal and less prone to devastating financial collapse, according to the head of the International Monetary Fund, Christine Lagarde. She says that some countries could boost the size of their economies by up to 35% if they abandoned discriminatory laws and took advantage of women’s skills. Last year, in our FTSE top 100 companies, the number of female chief executives was the same number as that of men named Dave or Steve. There is no shortage of exceptionally talented women in business, yet representation is still poor and the pay gap is still very evident in most areas of employment.

Even small changes can make a difference and create a more inclusive working environment. In my constituency office, a member of my staff team returned from maternity leave and was given time to express milk so that she could continue to breastfeed her baby. She is a skilled, intelligent young woman who is a great asset to our team. If she had not been given that reasonable adjustment, we may have lost her from the workforce. The seemingly small things can make a massive difference to women’s wellbeing and have a great, positive impact on the world of work and our economy.
I could name so many great, high-achieving women from history, including women who are alive today, some of whom are here in this place. I would like to focus, however, on real heroes in our country and around the world: the single mum who has three jobs, starting as a school cleaner at 6 am, then working as a lunchtime supervisor, and finally working a shift stocking shelves at the supermarket at 10 o’clock at night; the woman caring for her disabled child while also caring for her mum with dementia; the woman battling stage 4 cancer and continuing to work; and the woman starting a new job having moved out of her family home after surviving years of domestic violence. These are the women who have been hit hardest by the Government’s tax and benefit changes and who continue to fight on, managing life’s everyday challenges, made worse by nine years of relentless austerity.

In recent years, reports have shown that 86% of the burden of austerity since 2010 has fallen on women. There have been punitive benefits changes, cuts to legal aid, job insecurity, the closure of refuges and advice centres, and cuts to Sure Start centres. The women who face all these challenges every day of their lives are the ones we should acknowledge and pay tribute to today.

Charlotte Brontë said in “Jane Eyre”:

“I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will”.

It was true in the days of Charlotte Brontë, as it is true for women today. Women have always had this strength and passion, and I am proud to celebrate that today. Happy International Women’s Day, sisters.

2.33 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker). I know from personal experience that there are some very strong women in Colne Valley, and she is definitely one of them. It is also a great pleasure to speak in this debate to celebrate women across the whole world. We are celebrating and highlighting women’s achievements, as well as their tenacity and determination to beat the odds.

We can all cite many examples of exceptional women locally, nationally and internationally, but I start by focusing on an issue that predominantly affects women: domestic abuse, and specifically coercive and controlling behaviour. At this stage, I commend the Minister for her dedication and determination to stamp out domestic abuse and to build on the groundbreaking, world-leading work carried out by our right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), who is sadly no longer in her place, but who once again helped us all to pay tribute to those who have lost their lives as a result of domestic abuse.

This Government have done more than ever before to tackle violence against women and girls, but there is still more to do. It is not acceptable that in today’s society, one in four women in the UK will experience domestic abuse in their lifetime and one in five will experience sexual violence. Looking around the Chamber today—this includes the officials in the box—that means that probably five of us will experience domestic abuse and four will experience violence. These are, so often, hidden crimes that need to be brought out of the shadows.

That was recently brought to life in my surgery. A very brave young lady came to see me and told me of her experiences. For obvious reasons, I will not go into too much detail, but she raised a very important and relevant point. Her husband has been convicted of coercive behaviour and is now subject to a lengthy restraining order. However, as things stand, he still has shared parental responsibility for their children. I am led to believe that the restraining order does not trump parental responsibility, hence, for example, should any of the children need a passport before the age of 18, their father still has to sign the forms. Therefore, the restraining order would become null and void in that respect. Will the Minister look at such situations and see whether legislation can be strengthened to ensure that any restraining order takes precedence over parental responsibility?

On a lighter note, when I look around my local schools and nearby colleges, universities and hospitals, I see many amazing women heading up these public sector organisations. Across Derbyshire, we can now add Bishop Libby Lane to our amazing list of women. Bishop Libby was the Church of England’s first female bishop and she will become the first female Bishop of Derby after Easter. I look forward to welcoming her to the area.

On a political note, I am proud that four out of the five Erewash MPs since the seat was created in 1983 have been women. Erewash is definitely leading the way. When it comes to female representation, and long may that continue. It shows that women can get into politics at whatever level, whether that is parish level, local authority level or as Members of Parliament, and we must never forget the House of Lords, where there are some very strong women. We still have a long way to go with regard to getting equal representation, and I know that everybody in the House today is playing their part in helping to achieve that.

When I talk in debates such as the one today, I am always conscious of mentioning names, because I am always fearful that I will forget somebody. I mentioned Bishop Libby Lane and she is the only one that I am going to mention by name, because so many women across Erewash and Derbyshire are so important to everybody’s lives. That includes businesswomen as well as those in the public sector, and not only those who are heading up companies but those who play other important parts in industry. One of the traits of women is that we do not shout out. We do not say how good we are; we do not say how good we are; we just get on with life. We get on with conducting our business, looking after our family, furthering our education and making a success of whatever we do. I finish by commending everybody for playing their part to raise the success of women and for making sure that those who are listening today realise that if we can do it, anybody can.

2.39 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to speak in this year’s International Women’s Day debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing the time.

International Women’s Day provides an opportunity to reflect on how far we have come and on how far we still have to go. We also get the opportunity as sisters to
celebrate our sisterhood. The first International Women's Day was held back in 1911, at a time when women were still considered the property of men and our rights were limited, but, with International Women's Day organised by an international socialist women's conference, these pioneering women dared to dream of a world beyond oppression, indignity and subordination to patriarchy, of a world where men and women could stand as equals—imagine that!

It would take a further seven years for some women, and a further 17 years for all women, to win the right to vote. Leading that struggle were women such as Sylvia Pankhurst and Battersea's own Caroline Ganley and Charlotte Despard—I follow in the footsteps of some fantastic women. Courageous socialists, these women refused to accept injustice. They were oppressed, they fought, they struggled. Charlotte was arrested twice, but she fought on, and, because of what she and others did, we now have the right to stand in Parliament as women MPs. In 1918, Charlotte was the first woman to stand in Battersea North, and while she did not win, she paved the way for others to stand, and in 1945, Caroline Ganley became the first woman to be elected for Battersea.

I come now to the present day. For nine years, women have borne the brunt of austerity: many women services have closed, women have been hit hardest by public service job losses and the pay cap, and according to figures from the House of Commons Library, 86% of the cuts since 2010 have fallen on the shoulders of women. It is a near-decade-long assault on women's rights and freedoms. Women face sexual harassment and domestic abuse. The gender pay gap stands at 20%. I know that all my sisters on both sides of the House will agree that we have to address these inequalities.

Those inequalities are so much worse for working-class women, black women, women from ethnic minorities and disabled women such as myself, and it is as a disabled woman that I want to share something with the House. I have faced many barriers in my life—in education, in the workplace and so forth—so getting elected was a huge achievement, but unfortunately obtaining the additional support I need in this place to operate as an MP has been challenging. I am continuously fighting for additional support but being told by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, "We know you have additional needs, but we are not going to support those additional needs". It has made it very difficult for me.

The people of Battersea sent me here to represent them, and I should not have to fight the authorities here for the additional support I need, but I will fight on, because that it what I have had to do my whole life. I will keep fighting. It does not stop here. This is the one place where equality should exist and where no one should have to fight for the support they need, whether they are a woman, disabled, a black person, whatever. No one should have to fight that fight.

We have come a long way. We should never forget and never not celebrate it. The struggle and the courage of women such as Charlotte Despard and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), who is no longer in her place, paved the way for so many of us, and I am deeply grateful to them. Happy International Women's Day, sisters, and solidarity!
the number of women at different levels. The good news is that in comparison with our peers, we are on the way up—we have gone from No. 14 to No. 13—but wouldn’t it be great to get into the top 10? That is what we should aim for. It is estimated that if we could get to No. 2, it would help not only women but the whole of society. According to the maths, we would enhance the GDP of our country by 9% and enhance prosperity for all.

The women’s economic empowerment strategy on which the Government are working is important for everyone. It focuses on helping women who are on lower pay and helping older women to return to the workforce, and I hope that it will also focus on sexual harassment in the workplace. As was pointed out by my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, a recent survey showed that 40% of women have experienced it, and I strongly support her call for the role of the Equality and Human Rights Commission to be strengthened in that regard.

We in the UK are lucky, however. Across the world, 63 million girls are out of school and in conflict zones. Girls are two and a half times more likely not to be in school than boys and three times more likely to be victims of modern slavery. We should be enormously proud, as women, of the work that we are doing overseas, and as women, we should champion the work of the Department for International Development. Our DFID programmes are leading the fight to end sexual violence and conflict, to stamp out female genital mutilation and to protect children from forced marriages. We must stand together to support all the work that we are doing both here and overseas.

2.50 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): In 2018, CNN declared that if I were the year of the woman, because 2017 had not been. We might have started the Me Too movement, but we were promised that the glass ceiling would be shattered by a woman President, and instead we got Donald Trump. To this day, Harvey Weinstein and the Presidents Club men do not face any censure. However, I refuse to let my anger about those injustices deny my sisters around the world this platform on which I can celebrate and shout out their achievements.

I stand with those women who marched in January and set up the Time’s Up defence fund, now worth $22 billion. I pay tribute to Emma Gonzalez, a student in Parkland, Florida, who inspired us in February by fighting for gun control against President Trump, and to Professor Stephanie Page, who in March announced the details of the male contraceptive pill that she has developed. I pay tribute to Jenny Saville, who smashed records for women artists in selling their wares at Sotheby’s. In June, our sisters in Spain made history when the first female-led Cabinet was appointed. Just a few decades ago Spain had no women Ministers at all, so that is a massive shift.

I pay tribute to our sisters who are now on the committee that monitors the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, standing up for disabled women around the world. I pay tribute to Jacinda Ardern, the first elected woman leader to take maternity leave in office, and the second ever to give birth while in office. I pay tribute to our sisters in Argentina, who in June marched with the Green Tide movement for their own abortion rights. I pay tribute to our sisters who last summer, in Iran, finally had the opportunity to watch sport in a stadium alongside men, and to our sisters in Saudi Arabia who are finally allowed to drive.

In September, we stood with the inspirational Dr Christine Blasey Ford as she stood up against Brett Kavanaugh. In the same month Dame Jocelyn Bell Burnell, having been ignored by the Nobel prize system, finally won $3 million for her breakthrough achievements in physics, and chose to donate it to support those who are under-represented in physics. In October Nadia Murad won the Nobel peace prize, Donna Strickland won the Nobel prize for physics—she was only the third woman to do so—and Frances H. Arnold won the Nobel prize for chemistry; she was only the fifth ever to receive it. Sahle-Work Zewde was elected the first female President of Ethiopia. In November, those amazing women of America—including some who are here with us today—stood for election. We were rooting for you, and we will continue to root for you: we stand with you.

In December, Charlotte Prodger won the Turner prize, and Imelda Cortez, a rape victim who had been charged with attempted murder in El Salvador after giving birth to her abuser’s baby, was finally freed from prison. Our Palestinian and Jewish sisters organised a strike to voice their outrage at the murder of Yara Ayoub and Sylvia Tsegai, mobilising to break the silence and impunity for the murder of women.

However, last year we also saw our sisters in Ethiopia attacked. We saw Marielle Franco murdered in Brazil. We worked “for free” from 10 November. A teenage girl’s knickers were described to jurors in evidence during a rape trial. We saw a similar case involving Ulster rugby players. We saw Google employees having to stage a walkout because of sexual harassment. We saw a fall in convictions for rape and sexual assault; and yes, we still see inequalities in our society. We saw our sisters in South Africa having to take to the streets to protest against the increase in gender-based violence.

We also saw that the rates of female genital mutilation are going down in Africa but are still prevalent, and this year already we have had to speak up for Rahaf Mohammed, the teenager from Saudi Arabia who fled to Indonesia to escape her family, for the women of the south Indian state of Kerala who have come together to protest against being banned from entering Hindu temples, for our sisters in Sierra Leone who declared a national emergency over the sexual and gender-based violence, and for the cyclist who was stopped in a race because she was going as fast as the men. This is the world we still live in.

We have seen time and again the challenges our sisters face, whether our sisters in Northern Ireland still deny their basic right to control over their body or our sisters facing the problems of climate change.
[Stella Creasy]

To every one of those sisters out there I say, “We are with you.” To every one of those sisters I say, “You will find a voice here in the United Kingdom Parliament.” To every one of those sisters I say, “Liberté, Égalité, Sororité.”

2.55 pm  
Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I am pleased to be able to contribute to this debate ahead of International Women’s Day tomorrow, and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) on securing it.

The theme of this year’s International Women’s Day is “Balance for Better”, which is a call to action for driving gender balance across the world. For women to reach their full potential we need to address the issues that are holding women back, and very important among them is female genital mutilation. We all know that all too often the first message a girl receives about her body is that it is imperfect—too fat or too thin, too dark or too pale—but for some girls the message is that in order to be accepted by the wider community their bodies must be cut, altered and even reshaped by female genital mutilation.

In many communities, FGM is seen as a rite of passage, but it can result in serious health complications including infections, chronic pain and infertility, and it can even lead to fatalities. FGM is internationally recognised as a human rights violation, yet some 200 million girls and women alive today have undergone FGM. If current rates persist, around 68 million more will be cut by 2030.

Where it is practised, FGM is supported, usually without question, by both men and women, yet the reasons for the practice are often rooted in gender inequality. In some communities it is carried out to control women’s and girls’ sexuality. It is sometimes a prerequisite for marriage and is closely linked to child marriage.

FGM is practised in countries around the world: in 29 African countries, in Asia, in the middle east, in eastern Europe and in South America. In many western countries, including the UK, FGM is practised among diaspora populations from areas where the practice is commonplace. Some 5,391 new cases of FGM were reported in the UK in 2016-17, but it is well known that there has been only one successful prosecution for FGM in this country.

It was my pleasure yesterday to meet representatives from the Freedom Charity at an event organised by the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan). The Freedom Charity does vital work in engaging with schools in the UK to raise awareness of, and help combat, FGM, forced marriages and other crimes against children.

Although some associate FGM with religious practices, no religion promotes or condones FGM and many religious leaders have denounced it. FGM is a cultural rather than a religious practice, and now women and girls who have suffered FGM are speaking out.

Kadiga from Ethiopia said:

“I will never subject my child to FGM if she happens to be a girl, and I will teach her the consequences of the practice early on.”

Meaza, 15 years old, said:

“In my village there is one girl who is younger than I am who has not been cut because I discussed the issue with her parents. I told them how much the operation had hurt me, how it had traumatised me and made me not trust my own parents. They decided they did not want this to happen to their daughter.”

Zainab, who was infibulated at the age of eight, said:

“My two sisters, myself and our mother went to visit our family back home. I assumed we were going for a holiday. A bit later they told us we were going to be infibulated. The day before our operation was due to take place, another girl was infibulated and she died because of the operation. We were so scared and didn’t want to suffer the same fate. But our parents told us it was an obligation, so we went. We fought back, we really thought we were going to die because of the pain. You have one woman holding your mouth so you won’t scream, two holding your chest and the other two holding your legs. After we were infibulated, we had rope tied across our legs so it was like we had to learn to walk again. We had to try to go to the toilet. If you couldn’t pass water in the next 10 days something was wrong. We were lucky, I suppose. We gradually recovered and didn’t die like the other girl. But the memory and the pain never really go away.”

To eradicate FGM, co-ordinated and systematic efforts are needed, and they must engage whole communities and focus on human rights and gender equality. They must also address the sexual and reproductive health needs of women and girls who suffer from its consequences.

The United Nations Population Fund, jointly with UNICEF, leads the largest global programme to accelerate the abandonment of FGM. The programme currently focuses on 17 African countries and also supports regional and global initiatives. The law provides little protection, however. Many of the countries where FGM is prevalent have laws against the practice, but the enforcement of those laws is the problem, with much of the activity around FGM being secretive and concealed. On International Women’s Day, let us remember the girls and women around the world who have been or may become victims of this barbaric practice, and let us wipe it out once and for all.

3.1 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is an honour to be the penultimate Back-Bench speaker in this debate. We have heard many powerful contributions, including those dealing with discrimination leading to violence against women. I have experienced great solidarity on the issue of fighting discrimination in the past year and a half since I became a Member of Parliament, and if that solidarity continues, I really believe that we can make progress, particularly on the very dark side of discrimination.

Today I want to focus on something slightly closer to home—namely, my own experience as I was growing up. As I grew up in the 1970s, I looked forward to a future of exciting possibilities. The world was my oyster. I could follow my passions, study, develop my skills, build my career and have a family. It never occurred to me that my career options could be limited because I was a woman, that I would not automatically attain the same level of responsibility, pay and influence that my male counterparts would, that I might have to sacrifice my career aspirations when we started a family because I earned less than my husband, that there was an automatic assumption that I would take on the lion’s share of looking after our young children, or that in 2019 I would still have to speak out in this House against the ongoing discrimination and undervaluing of women in the UK. But here I am, and because I have a voice in Parliament, I am using it today to remind
everybody that we must continue our efforts to fight discrimination—particularly its darker side—and to create a true gender balance in every sector of our society.

In the world of business, recent research from the Chartered Management Institute shows that, despite long-standing efforts to shift deeply entrenched attitudes, systems and practices, as many as 85% of women and 80% of men say they have seen discriminatory behaviour in a professional environment. The same research found that 75% of senior managers believe their peers are not actively and visibly promoting gender initiatives.

Although the gender pay gap has narrowed, women in this country are still being paid less than men. This has many damaging consequences. When a couple choose to have a child, they decide which parent will take time out to raise that child. They will weigh up what makes the most sense financially. In most cases, the partner on lower pay will, at least initially, reduce their working hours and take the hit to their career. In the majority of cases, the partner who stays at home is the woman.

Once a woman exits her career, for whatever reason—be it to start a family or to care for a family member—her promotion prospects are likely to diminish. Re-entering the world of work can be very challenging, especially if a person wants to do it on their own terms by job sharing, working part time, working flexibly or working from home. Those who return to work may have to start on lower pay, sacrificing years of valuable experience. They may be overlooked for promotion, and they are often seen as not being committed enough.

Gender generalisation can be dangerous, but most of us have seen that our cultural conditioning has promoted competitiveness and risk-taking—qualities that are more associated with male attitudes than with female ones—in the workplace over co-operation and empathy. Women bring a different approach to business and organisations. There is sound evidence that a company’s long-term profitability rises with a more gender-balanced management. Collectively, we are failing ourselves and the generations that are to come by perpetuating discrimination, even if it is subtle. Our economy is losing out, as we all are.

The vision of a truly liberal society is that everybody can be themselves and thrive. We must not hold women back. I want every woman in our society to feel as though she can realise her full potential, and we are not there yet. As I said at the very beginning, I hope very much that the solidarity that we have created in this place—that includes men as well as women—means that we do more and do better. I hope that by next year, rather than just talking the talk we will be walking the walk, and that we will see progress, particularly against the dark side of discrimination where women face violence. Let us do better than we have done in previous years.

3.6 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I am thankful to be able to make a contribution. I was raised by a wonderfully strong and loving mother, and I married an equally strong wife. I also have two granddaughters, and I am conscious that my mother’s strength of character and my wife’s compassion will make them very successful in their lives to come.

My mother is 87 years of age and 4 foot 10, and she laboured beside my 6-foot father, stride for stride, all their lives. She was determined not by her tiny frame, but by her heart of a lion. No task was ever too much for mum, and I like to think that some of her grit and determination has come through to me and the rest of the family. My parliamentary aide often uses a wee statement that reminds me of a comment by Margaret Thatcher: “If you want something talked about, let a man do it, but if you want something done, give it to a woman.” I am ever mindful of the fact that there are exceptions to that, and I hope that I am one.

Today, I want to mention three people of Ulster extraction who played a big role in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and across the world. The first is Cecil Frances Humphreys, a famous hymn writer. In the 1840s she wrote many compositions that appeared in the Church of Ireland hymnals. She married William Alexander, who became the Bishop of Derry and the Archbishop of Armagh. Many of her hymns are still important to us. “All Things Bright and Beautiful”, “There Is a Green Hill Far Away” and “Once in Royal David’s City”, to mention just three, remain popular across the world.

Isabella Tod was born in Edinburgh, but she spent most of her life in Belfast. She became Ulster’s pre-eminent advocate of votes for women and women’s education. She campaigned for changes in the law that resulted in the Married Women’s Property Act 1882. She secured the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, and she championed the right of women to higher education. She also persuaded the Queen’s University of Ireland to allow girls to take examinations and be awarded certificates. What a wonderful legacy she has left behind.

Sarah Leech, the daughter of a linen weaver, was born in Raphoe, in County Donegal, into the Ulster Scots tradition. Her staunch Unionism was evidenced by her poems. Sarah’s weaver poetry is genuinely impressive, and I greatly appreciate her impact on Ulster Scots poetry even to this generation and beyond.

I read a tremendous article on family life among the Ulster Scots settlers in America—it is nice to have a lady from the United States with us in the Gallery—that praised the role of women. That is something that my wife would agree with. Among those settlers, men were the warriors and women were the workers.

For generations those men had to be warriors in the old countries of Scotland, England and Ireland, and the pattern did not change just because they migrated to America. In any society where the men go off to war, the women do much more labour at home. That was true for those Ulster Scots, too. In those families, the women laboured in the fields right beside their husbands—the women of Ulster and this United Kingdom remain the same.

I join everyone who has spoken in this debate in celebrating the achievements of women who work hard in their occupation, raise their family, reach the top of their field—as everyone who has spoken in this debate has done—and raise the next generation to stop seeing gender and simply judge on ability.

3.10 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is a huge pleasure to follow such an esteemed list of female parliamentarians and, indeed, our esteemed colleague from Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).
The comments of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), who is not in her place, were incredibly powerful. We could have heard a penny drop in the Chamber as she read out the names of the women who have died as a result of domestic violence and abuse in the past year. I am proud that in Scotland the SNP Government have brought in world-leading domestic abuse legislation, but we still face a huge challenge.

Today is World Book Day, and one of my favourite books I have read recently is “Eve Was Shamed” by Helena Kennedy, who sits in the other place. She talks about structural inequalities in the justice system, which we must continue to focus on across all jurisdictions in the UK.

This year’s theme for International Women’s Day is “Balance for Better,” and it is a great opportunity to talk about those structural inequalities for women, as well as intersectionality and discrimination against women from black and ethnic minority communities, from the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community, who are disabled or from any minority group.

I stress at the outset that it is essential to understand that women’s rights are not to be achieved at the cost of men. There is a huge role for men to play—husbands, fathers, sons, brothers and friends. I hasten to add that my own brother is an ardent feminist. He and I were brought up by a single mother, and he has a female partner and a female daughter, so he has been surrounded by women his whole life.

One of the things we have talked about recently—I raised it earlier at Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions—is the scourge of online media, particularly social media and gaming. Much has been said about the abuse that female parliamentarians particularly receive, and about the creep of abuse online.

The streaming of the game “Rape Day,” which was recently released by developer Desk Plant, has, thank goodness, been stopped on the Steam platform. I find it incredible that someone would sit behind a computer and create a game based on verbally harassing, killing and raping women, with content including violence, sexual assault, non-consensual sex, obscene language, necrophilia and incest. In any world, why would anyone play that game?

There has been a huge outcry, including from Shona Robison, my colleague in the Scottish Parliament, who raised it at First Minister’s questions today. The First Minister herself called it out. A game of this nature has no place in our society, and I am glad it has been pulled but, at a time when one in five women will experience sexual violence in their life and young teens are learning about sex from online porn, I question the morals of those behind the game.

A few weeks ago, the NSPCC published a report highlighting its research on social media and online harm, and I am sure the results will shock everyone in the Chamber and parents at home. Technology-facilitated grooming has become a major challenge. In 2017-18, across the UK, there were more than 3,500 police-recorded offences of sexual communication with a child. In England and Wales, 70% of offences, where the data was recorded, took place on Facebook, Snapchat or Instagram. We must do everything possible to challenge those online platforms to stop the scourge of online harm and abuse.

An average of one child per primary school class has been sent or shown a naked or semi-naked image online by an adult, and more than one in seven children aged 11 to 18 has been asked to send self-generated images and sexual messages. Terrifyingly, the Home Office says that an estimated 80,000 adults in the UK pose a sexual threat to children online. I am sure that is shocking for all of us.

The Scottish Government have implemented a huge number of progressive and world-leading policies to better support women and young people across Scotland. We have introduced legislation that makes Scotland the only part of the UK with requirements for gender parity on public boards. The Gender Representation on Public Boards (Scotland) Bill was recently passed in our Parliament and it sets an objective for listed public authorities that 50% of the non-executive members of their boards should be women. I hope the Minister will take that into consideration. I know that her Government have done a significant amount, particularly on getting companies with more than 250 employees to register their gender pay gap, but more must be done. We must look at the position in companies with fewer than 250 employees, because some of the worst discrimination often lies in those companies.

The Minister will know that as soon as Nicola Sturgeon became Scotland’s First Minister she had a Cabinet with a 50:50 gender balance—one of only three in the world. Many Members have spoken of pioneering women, and I want to pay tribute to my colleagues in the constituency, Fiona Hyslop, the Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Tourism and External Affairs, and Angela Constance MSP, who was until recently the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning. Both women have represented West Lothian constituencies and both have been in the Cabinet. The Livingston constituency has fielded female candidates in the past six elections, including my mother in 2010.

I was interested to hear the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) say that International Women’s Day was started 110 years ago, by women who were garment workers. My grandmother was a garment worker during the second world war. She met my grandfather when working for Rolls-Royce. When she returned to work after marrying, she was told that her job was a job for men and that she should not be doing it, and she was given her books—in essence, she was dismissed. Married women were not eligible for employment of this sort—she was told that it was “men’s work”. It took her until she was in her 80s to tell my mother and I:

“Did the three men they kept on to do my job weren’t worth a tenth of me.”

It has taken four generations of women in my family to get to a position of what could be called “power and influence”, but we got there. In the words of Angela Davis:

“I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept.”

3.17 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): It is great to have this International Women’s Day debate today, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) for leading on the tabling of the motion.
I also thank the Select Committee chaired by the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for its work. As I have said publicly, she does an amazing job on the Committee; it is just a disappointment that the Prime Minister often does not take on board its recommendations. This debate began about two hours later than we expected. I know that that is because of the business of the House, but if the Government had secured the time and made this Government business, the debate could have had protected time. The situation is a little disappointing.

I wish to welcome our international guest Stacey Abrams. It was not so long ago that I was walking the long, long streets of Atlanta with a friend of mine, Gary, trying to get the first black woman elected as Governor of Georgia. I am sure that her next election will be very successful. I saw some voting practices in the United States that truly shocked me. There were no practical reasons for the long four-hour queues, but there were political reasons for them. That is why I support Stacey’s fight for free and fair elections, and the fairfightaction.com campaign.

As we have heard many times, in some amazing contributions from Members from all parts of the House, the theme of this year’s International Women’s Day is “Balance for Better”, with the vital aim of building a gender-balanced world. I do not mind what works or how it works, just as long as it works for all women and as long as we remove the structural barriers. After all, gender stereotypes have a detrimental effect on men as well as women, as we see in the mental health problems among men and the growth in the number of male suicides. If we could eliminate the gender stereotyping, we would have a better society for all.

We need to call out the barriers to progress. Although it has been nice to agree with Members from all parties, we have to call out the structural barriers, which means we have to call out the burden the Government have placed on women. Some 87% of cuts have fallen on women’s shoulders. Cuts have consequences. We have heard today about knife crime and the NHS. When funding for all these vital services is cut, it has devastating consequences, especially for women.

It is no secret in my office that I like to go home and watch “Neighbours” — [Interruption] — “Bless you,” I hear from a sedentary position — I know! There was quite a storyline this week when the well-loved character Sonya, played by Eve Morey, died of ovarian cancer. That made me look at the figures on how NHS cuts affect women. Twelve women a day die from ovarian cancer. We need more investment in things like the NHS to get better outcomes for women.

The next Labour Government will have a different approach and go much further than this Government in tackling the structural barriers in society. We will put forward a radical and progressive agenda to empower women. I think the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) agreed with Labour’s policy that I announced at our conference. Channelling the great philosopher Dolly Parton, I announced that we would introduce rights to flexible working from day one of employment.

Under our plans, no women will be shut out of the workplace. It is about bringing the workplace into the 21st century. It is not about working longer hours; it is about working hours to suit our complicated lives. The United Nations reported that the disadvantages facing women and girls are a major source of inequality and one of the greatest barriers to the progress of human development. In around 90 countries, women spent roughly three times as many hours in unpaid domestic and care work as men, which is why the flexible working policy that I announced at the Labour party’s conference is so important.

The gender pay gap is growing in hundreds of companies, which is worrying. Combined with the fact that companies have reported mathematically impossible data and that there are no sanctions for that, it kind of makes a mockery of the system and calls into question the Government’s commitment. After all, even the Ministry of Justice missed the deadline. Labour will go further by making it mandatory for large companies to conduct audits, alongside action plans. Those with good gender practices will receive Government certification, while those that fail to take action will face fines. We will not just monitor the pay gap but close it.

It is time to stop paying lip service to women and time that we value women and their contribution to society, whether it be at work or in the home. Part of that valuing is acknowledging the changes from menstruating to menopause. Not all women will have these issues, but when they do, it should be acknowledged and accommodated. So, on period poverty we will go further. Labour has pledged to provide free sanitary products in schools, colleges and food banks, and we are currently working with the GMB trade union on a menopause workplace policy and a WASPI women policy.

When it comes to harassment at work, I am afraid the Government have again failed to deliver progress to prevent another Presidents Club scandal from happening. By contrast, Labour has pledged to reinstate section 40 of the Equality Act to protect employees from third party harassment, from day one.

As we have heard, one in three women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate-partner violence or non-partner sexual violence. The World Health Organisation states that violence against women is a major health problem. We must tackle it with great urgency. I hope the domestic violence Bill that the Minister has announced will go further than the draft Bill currently does.

The way to advance gender equality is not by having one person at the top, but by removing the structural barriers so that many women and under-represented groups can make it to the top. That is why a Labour Government will remove the career ladder that has held so many women and people of colour back for too long, and we will replace it with a career escalator, so that the journey to success and the top will be smoother and unhindered. The UN found that the structural barriers that act as obstacles to women’s participation include discriminatory laws and institutions, lack of contacts and resources, lower levels of education, gender stereotypes, and the disproportionate effect of poverty on women.

This year marks the centenary of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919. The Act enabled women to become barristers, solicitors, jurors and magistrates. It also enabled them to enter professions such as accounting. One would have thought that our progress would be much faster than it is now.
As I come to the end of my contribution, I wish to mention our international responsibility. Just this week, with representatives from Unite, I met Thabitha, who, like me, represents the Opposition party. We have shared beliefs in justice, equality and democracy—we even share a sense of humour. Thabitha’s battle brought me to tears. On 22 November last year, she and her colleagues were beaten by police in the Parliament for refusing to stand for the President. Footage of this horrific act can still be seen online.

I asked Thabitha where she gets her strength from, and she told me that she wants her dignity back. She said that she wants to see more women in Parliament and that she does not want the next generation to suffer. She also said that she does not want the next generation of women to be raped. She is an inspiration and exactly the kind of strong woman that we should be celebrating on International Women’s Day, but her story shows just how far we still have to go for the emancipation of women across the world.

In delivering Labour’s policy, we will allow all women to progress. We will reward good work and good workplace practices and help those businesses to grow. We will ensure that strong workplace protections are in place and that there is access to justice. On International Women’s Day 2019, as we “Balance for Better”, I say let us remove the structural barriers, let us build for an escalator and a lift to success, let us understand the escalation and lift to success, let us believe in the power. I note the fact that she is the 265th of 491 women ever to have been Members of Parliament. The fact that she is an inspiration and exactly the kind of strong woman that we should be celebrating on International Women’s Day, but her story shows just how far we still have to go for the emancipation of women across the world.

I thank every Member, both female and male, who has attended the debate and contributed today. International Women’s Day is primarily a day of celebration. We have certainly heard speeches today that offer great hope and optimism for the future and that have demonstrated that, in many areas, we are making real progress towards a more equal society. At the same time, we have heard appalling details of inequality from a number of speakers and clear evidence of the prejudices that women and girls still face.

We heard what I consider to be one of the most important events in the parliamentary calendar, which was the reading by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) of the names of the women who have been killed by men since the last International Women’s Day. Their names have been read out. They are in the parliamentary records, and they are remembered.

I am pleased also that colleagues raised the issue of the domestic abuse Bill. This is a landmark piece of legislation and, of course, is accompanied by a raft of non-legislative measures. As if we had not already heard reason enough from the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley for this Bill, my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) cited a particularly concerning case of coercive behaviour—a relatively new offence that we introduced in 2015, and I will of course look into that.

Yesterday, we launched an updated version of the violence against women and girls strategy because, sadly, violence against women and girls happens in the home, in the workplace and on the streets, and this strategy will implement a review of the criminal justice response to rape and serious sexual violence. Having visited several rape centres recently, I am concerned—as are others in the Chamber—about the drop-off between reporting and action to bring perpetrators to justice, so I hope this review will get the answers we require.

The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) rightly raised the matter of FGM and so-called honour-based violence. We have secured the first conviction for FGM only recently—not for want of trying by many police forces and those who support victims. In addition, a great deal has been going on over the last few years, including forced marriage protection orders, anonymity for victims and mandatory reporting duties for FGM survivors. Indeed, at this very moment in time there is an event at No. 10 to discuss what more we can do to tackle FGM and forced marriage.

Hannah Bardell: Does the Minister agree that something that has not been mentioned an awful lot in this debate is the responsibility of the media and victim-blaming? We hear far too much about violent men who “just snapped” and innocent women who have been killed or injured not taking enough responsibility for their own safety. That has to stop and the narrative has to change.

Victoria Atkins: I very much hope that the hon. Lady will be making those points to the Joint Committee on Human Rights, which has been appointed to look into the domestic abuse Bill.

Several colleagues, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) and the first ever female MP for Plaid Cymru, the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), mentioned the role of social media and tech including games. We are due to publish our online harms White Paper very soon. Hon. Members may also be interested to know that I have commissioned research into the effect of pornography on attitudes towards women and girls; there is a lot that we need to look into there. We have also initiated projects tackling child sexual exploitation across the world, including WeProtect.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Victoria Atkins: I am afraid that I am going to have to continue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) continued her campaign to encourage women who enjoy science, technology, engineering and maths, and I have to say that her mum sounds as persuasive as she is.
Many colleagues drew on the experiences of the last year’s gender pay gap reports. Of course, this year’s reporting deadlines are approaching: 30 March for public sector employers, and 4 April for private and third sector employers. Please meet the deadline. I am delighted that 100% of employers who should report did report last year, and we expect that level to be maintained; it is the law. I am also pleased that around 48% of employers have published action plans to tackle their pay gaps. Reporting is the first step, but sorting it out is the second step that we demand.

We are working to normalise flexible working. We have launched a £1.5 million campaign to promote shared parental leave, and we have invested more than £5 million in increasing opportunities and support for people who have taken time out of the labour market for caring responsibilities.

Financial independence is absolutely key for women, and I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke mentioned the difficulty that women entrepreneurs face when obtaining loans and finance. I hope that the Rose review, which will be published tomorrow, provides her Committee with much evidence to look at. This week we have announced the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy consultation on non-disclosure agreements because of the concerns that she and her Committee have raised about the use of such agreements.

Many colleagues understandably raised the issues of political representation, including my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), who chairs the all-party parliamentary group for women in Parliament. She reminded us of the centenary celebrations last year, which were enjoyed by many thousands of people across the country. She also set out the challenges facing female candidates and MPs across political parties. My hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent reminded the House that the first woman MP ever to take her seat here and the first ever woman Prime Minister were Conservative women. My challenge to Labour Members is: next time trust a woman to lead your party. I wonder if they will take me up on that challenge.

Many colleagues mentioned international work. We are doing an enormous amount of work through DFID to help women and girls around the world.

The theme for this year’s International Women’s Day is “Balance for Better”, and I want to highlight some of the ways in which a better gender balance is becoming a reality. Female employment is at a record high. The gender pay gap is at a record low. There are now 1.2 million women-led businesses across the country. We have higher percentages of women on boards than ever before. I am delighted that the hon. Member for Livingston set out what Scotland is doing as well.

These are just some of our excellent achievements in recent times that deserve to be celebrated, but there is much more to do across every aspect of public life. That includes, interestingly, the role of female statues. Last year, the Prime Minister unveiled the statue of Millicent Fawcett in Parliament Square—a fantastic celebration and achievement. One new female statue has been added to London in recent days. I commend it to everyone who has time when they are in and around every St Paul’s cathedral—it is the statue “Fearless Girl”. She resembles every little girl I have ever seen who looks defiant and determined to get her way. My encouragement to everyone across the House is this: be fearless this International Women’s Day.

Mrs Miller: I thank all Members who have taken part in this excellent debate. It is right that we remember Nancy Astor—an extraordinary woman who had the courage to be the first woman to sit on these green Benches. The unacceptable abuse that too many women parliamentarians face today means that courage is a necessity for all of us who are elected to public life. To women around the country, whether they are councillors, mayors, police commissioners or Members of Parliament, I say, “Courage calls to courage everywhere”, and happy International Women’s Day tomorrow, which is also my youngest son’s 17th birthday.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered International Women’s Day.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I have to inform the House of corrections to the results of some of yesterday’s deferred Divisions. In each case, there was one power Aye vote than previously announced.

On the motion relating to electricity, the Ayes were 301 and the Noes were 44; on the motion relating to gas, the Ayes were 299 and the Noes were 44; on the motion relating to food, the Ayes were 302 and the Noes were 44; on the motion relating to electronic communications, the Ayes were 300 and the Noes were 257; and on the motion relating to road traffic, the Ayes were 300 and the Noes were 251.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I just want to understand the reason for the change in the number of votes. I am curious about what caused it.

Madam Deputy Speaker: A name was recorded in error, I gather.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. These things sometimes happen when the Tellers cannot count. I once had to confess that I had got something wrong. In those days it mattered, but now it does not seem to.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. I suggest that that is the sort of thing best kept quiet, really.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Because there was so little time at the end of the previous debate, the Minister did not have a chance to pay tribute to the work done by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, which is funded by the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development. It hosted the great conference for women here in November, it recently hosted another fabulous conference on political leadership for women in Malaysia, and it will continue to do that work.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has ingeniously made a point about the previous debate as opposed to the debate I am anxious that we now get on to, because time is still short.
Sir William Cash: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Minister did not have time to take my intervention, but I simply wanted to put on record the massive contribution of the International Development (Gender Equality) Act 2014, which I had the honour of introducing with my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening).

Madam Deputy Speaker: Splendid. I am sure that the hon. Members for Stone (Sir William Cash) and for Gloucester (Richard Graham) would have been welcome in the debate, but their retrospective contributions to it have been noticed.

James Duddridge: I beg to move, That this House has considered opportunities and challenges facing the modern Commonwealth in its 70th year.

It is that time of year when we await the riot of colour of 53 flags representing the Commonwealth opposite Parliament. It is for that reason—the celebration of Commonwealth Day—that I am here today. I wear my own riot of colour: the rather disgusting combination of colours on my tie is that of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association UK branch, which is not to be confused with the international branch, chaired by Emilia Lifaka, who will be here next week.

I have chaired the UK branch since the rather unfortunate general election in 2017 and very much enjoyed the task. I see in the Chamber my hon. Friends—I think I can use that term—the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) and the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson). Without their tireless work, the CPA as it is now would not be in existence.

Sir Peter Bottomley: The House will be grateful to my hon. Friend, others who serve on the executive committee of the CPA UK branch and those who work for it for the good they do in this country and with our fellow Commonwealth nations around the world. It seems to be one of those things where the work that parliamentarians do is not noticed but is appreciated and could be even better in the future.

James Duddridge: I thank my hon. Friend for that and extend thanks to Jon Davies and his team of 30 people who work here in the UK, off Westminster Hall, and overseas.

To give an idea of the volume of activity, in 2017-18 there were 15 outbound delegations, 35 inbound delegations and nine multilateral delegations. As I look around the Chamber, I see people who have been involved in inbound and outbound trips in the last month. There have been trips to Fiji, the Seychelles, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The CPA was also very much involved in election observing, particularly in the overseas territories. As a committee, we have formed our strategic priorities. We decided that we could not do everything exceptionally well, so we are concentrating on five key themes: women in Parliament, public finance scrutiny, modern slavery, trade and security.

This debate is about opportunities and challenges facing the modern Commonwealth in its 70th year—“modern” because the Commonwealth existed in various guises before the 1949 London declaration, but it was a free association of independent member countries. Quite how we got away with that as part of the European Union, I do not know. Crucially, the Commonwealth gave an equal say to all its 53 members, regardless of size—at one end is India, with a population of 1.3 billion, and at the other is Nauru, with a population of only 13,000. Of the states, 31 have populations of fewer than 1.5 million and five have populations of fewer than 1 million.
They are nations all around the globe. There are 19 in Africa, which I know and love well, and others are in parts of the world that I know less well, with seven countries in Asia, 13 in the Caribbean and the Americas, three here in Europe and 11 in the Pacific. It is so popular, and it is expanding, to Cameroon, Mozambique and Rwanda—more of Rwanda later. It was good to see the Gambia come back into the Commonwealth in February 2018, and I was able to travel there.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the most welcome developments in the Commonwealth’s expansion in the past 70 years is that its members now include countries that have no historical links with the United Kingdom, such as Mozambique and Rwanda?

James Duddridge: Absolutely. That shows the strength of the Commonwealth. It is of course Her Majesty who leads the Commonwealth and makes the final decision, before they come in, on whether such countries share the same values, but it is certainly an expanding and very diverse organisation. I have mentioned that Her Majesty the Queen is the head of the Commonwealth, and we also have the secretary-general, Baroness Scotland, leading its work.

It is Commonwealth Day on Monday. It is always in the second week of March each year, and I asked myself why? It was the Canadians’ idea. They wanted the Commonwealth to be about the future and about young people, and they wanted it to be celebrated by schoolchildren. They worked out that we have different term times all around the world, but the most likely time when all children will be in school is the second week of March, and that is why we celebrate it at that particular time.

Here in the UK, there will be a week of celebrations, including at Westminster Abbey and Marlborough House. There will be cultural events, civic events and school events. Flags will be raised across the United Kingdom, and there will be some street parties. Anyone who has not invited me to their street party should feel free to email me at the House of Commons.

One of the big issues in the Commonwealth recently has been the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, where all 53 members come together. There are normally one or two that, for various domestic reasons, cannot make it. It was particularly good to see Prime Minister Modi of India at CHOGM here. CHOGM is not a one-off event: the country that hosts CHOGM is then responsible for the operations leading up to the next one in two years’ time. We are passing the mantle from London to the Rwandans in Kigali.

One of the things I very much hope to do is to work with the Rwandans to have a Commonwealth forum. CHOGM is dominated by the Executives, and we in the UK felt that parliamentarians should lobby the Executives. Parliamentarians from around the Commonwealth came together to talk, and then went back to our Executives before CHOGM to lay out the issues we cared about, and that was powerful. It was not perfect, and we have lessons to learn on what we did with the parliamentary forum. Almost 50 parliamentarians met about a month before CHOGM here in the UK, and this is something we would like the Rwandans to do.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Does he agree that parliamentarians also work on issues such as malaria? I chair the all-party group on malaria here, but there are also all-party groups in Tanzania and Uganda. That had a great effect on the commitment by the Commonwealth Heads of Government last year to halve the number of deaths in malaria cases in Commonwealth countries over the next few years.

James Duddridge: One of the great advantages of being a Back Bencher, not a Minister, is that one can say, “I am sure the Minister was listening”, and move on swiftly.

I am conscious of time, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the last point I want to make involves trade and Brexit. The Commonwealth is not the solution to any problems or the definition of any Brexit opportunities, but the Commonwealth currently represents 9% of UK exports. By various measures, there is an advantage to it: doing business with the Commonwealth is easier, and there is a shared language, history and legal system. It makes sense, and it is easier, to trade intra-Commonwealth and with the Commonwealth. Overall, Commonwealth trade represents 14% of the global economy, so as we look at trade deals post Brexit, we should pay particular attention to the Commonwealth. Clearly it is not as simple as having one Commonwealth deal, but we should look first to the Commonwealth and then to the rest of the world.

I wish all Members of this House a very happy Commonwealth Week.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. This will be quite a short debate, so I will start by imposing a seven-minute time limit on speeches—I was able to warn the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) about that.
3.50 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) for securing this debate, and for his excellent chairing of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association UK. As he noted, this debate is timely not only because it allows us to consider opportunities in the Commonwealth, but also because Commonwealth Day is next Monday.

This is a really important period for the Commonwealth and for the role that the UK might play in helping it to address the key issues of our time. The UK currently holds the position of chair-in-office for two years, following the successful CHOGM in 2018. It is welcome that the Foreign Secretary stated that the UK is determined to work closely with its partners to maintain that momentum following CHOGM, and to revitalise and reform the Commonwealth for the 21st century.

The enormity of the task from CHOGM is perhaps best reflected in its communiqué, in which the following notable goals were agreed: to adopt the Commonwealth blue charter on sustainable development; to commit to ratify and implement the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women; to address the stigma around disability; to expand investment and boost intra-Commonwealth trade; to adopt a Commonwealth connectivity declaration; and to adopt a Commonwealth cyber declaration.

In the short time available, I will focus on three of the issues raised in the communiqué. The first is the commitment to ratify and implement the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, as it is incredibly important for the Commonwealth to have that as a priority. For many years, the Commonwealth Women’s Forum, the Royal Commonwealth Society and Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians have sought to address the lack of women’s representation in Parliament, and that is a key issue if women’s lives across the Commonwealth are to be improved.

Some of the best practice in securing greater parliamentary representation for women is found in the Commonwealth. Rwanda tops the global league table for women’s representation, at 61.3%. That is followed by Namibia, at 46%, and Uganda, at 34%. In lots of Commonwealth countries women’s representation is around 30%, including in the UK, but sadly the level is lower in a number of countries, such as Malawi, where it is 16.7%, and Botswana, with 9.5%. There is zero representation in Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu. Those figures demonstrate that much more needs to be done to improve the representation of women in Parliament, because without mechanisms to address that issue, women’s representation tends to stagnate at 30% or lower.

The mechanism most frequently used in the Commonwealth is quotas, but there are issues attached to that—most notably that women are often brought in on a top-up list and find it difficult to get re-elected. We need a culture change. The recommended benchmarks for democratic legislatures were recently updated by the CPA. That helps with this issue, as those benchmarks state that Parliaments should take issues of equality seriously and encourage the use of equality impact assessments in the development of legislation, policies and budgets. All Parliaments—including our own—would benefit from doing that. It is important that those benchmarks do not sit on the shelf, and that they inform the work of Parliaments. The work on gender is supported by the sustainable development goals. One opportunity we have is to work on universal SDGs right across the Commonwealth, and ensure we empower all women and girls to meet their full potential.

The second issue I want to raise is the need to address climate change. This relates to SDG 13. It is a huge issue across the Commonwealth, but particularly for Pacific countries. We need to work with our other family members in the Commonwealth to ensure that they address climate changes, and that we assist them in that process by the actions we take in the UK and across the Commonwealth.

The third issue is trade. The Commonwealth has a population of 2.3 billion, 60% of whom are aged 29 or under. Enormous opportunities exist for us to develop key services. I would pick out, given the age of Commonwealth members’ citizens, opportunities in education and economic development. We all want to improve opportunities for trade and investment for all countries.

In the final couple of minutes, I want to raise two omissions from the communiqué. The first, extraordinarily, is Brexit. That might be because of the countries that attended, but there are challenges with Brexit in terms of the impact that it will have on some of our overseas territories, including Gibraltar. Clearly, there are also opportunities and we need to do what we can to exploit them. The second omission from the communiqué is the absence of any measures to address the lack of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights in some Commonwealth countries. I know that that is a difficult conversation to have, but it is one we need to undertake.

The CPA does amazing work across the Commonwealth to advocate for and provide training to achieve more inclusive and effective Parliaments. It works with clerks and public accounts committees, so that higher standards of probity exist, and campaigns to ensure that the voices of parliamentarians are not ignored by the Executive. It could, however, do so much more if its status as a parliamentary organisation. CPA has requested that change and it is currently sitting with Her Majesty’s Government. It would be great if the Minister could give us an update today on the timescale to deal with that.

In conclusion, we need to have vision and ambition for the Commonwealth. We need to work across both Houses of Parliament and all Parliaments across the Commonwealth to achieve that, and to build a better and more prosperous Commonwealth for all of us.

3.57 pm

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): “Hear, hear” to the concluding statements of the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods), with which I completely concur.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge). I would like to think that it was our joint time in the Foreign Office that gave us a deep respect and a certain understanding of the Commonwealth. Being Ministers to address Commonwealth for over four years was one of the most enjoyable parts of my political career to date. I was, however, always aware that one had constantly to remind the Foreign
Office that it is the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. While I am enormously pleased to be taking part in this debate before Commonwealth Day, which falls on Monday, I regret to say the fact that we do not debate the Commonwealth more regularly. It is not something that we should pick up and dust down once a year; it is something that we should embrace and encourage. The Commonwealth is only as good as its constituent members and we have a lead to give. I do wish this place would take the Commonwealth a little bit more seriously.

When I left the Foreign Office, I wanted to continue doing something for the Commonwealth, so I took on the deputy chairmanship of the Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council—I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. In the time available this afternoon, I want to focus on some of the economic issues surrounding the Commonwealth. I think the opportunities are huge, although I agree with my hon. Friend; I would never think that trade with the Commonwealth could replace trade with Europe. It is an “also”, not an “instead of”. I made that point during the debate on Brexit, at a time when I was arguing for remain. We would be foolish to ignore the statistics for the Commonwealth, because it is so self-evidently in our interest to take it all a bit more seriously.

While the growth of the populations and the GDP of the United States, the EU, China and our other traditional partners has been stagnating, Commonwealth economies continue to grow, along with the disposable income of their consumers. Let us take, for example, Commonwealth Africa, which is dear to my hon. Friend’s heart. Since 2000, GDP growth in sub-Saharan African nations has been much faster than the global average and the growth of the more prosperous north African nations, with the IMF projecting the region’s GDP to have increased by 46% between 2000 and 2022—a staggering statistic. The African Development Bank estimates that Africa’s middle class has grown to 350 million since 2010, with private consumption increasing by an average of 3.7% year on year in the same period. Consumer spending is estimated to account for 50% to 60% of the growth in Africa’s economy and is expected to rise from $680 billion in 2009 to $2.2 trillion by 2030.

That is just Commonwealth Africa. Let us move across and look at Commonwealth India. India has outpaced China to become the world’s fastest-growing economy. According to the United Nations, its population is projected to overtake that of China by 2022. In the eight years culminating in 2012, the size of India’s middle-class population is estimated to have doubled, to 600 million. Between 1990 and 2015, the number of households with a disposable income of more than US$10,000 has risen twentyfold, to nearly 50 million, and its middle-class population is predicted to overtake that of China, the US and the EU by 2027. That is manifestly good, both in terms of addressing the issues of poverty and in the opportunities that that presents for British companies and exporters.

The UK recorded a trade surplus of £7 billion with the Commonwealth in 2017. UK exports of goods and services to the Commonwealth stand at £56.3 billion. UK imports from the Commonwealth stand at £49.3 billion and the UK has recorded a trade surplus with the Commonwealth every year since 2010. The problem, and one of the challenges, is that India, Canada, Australia, Singapore and South Africa currently account for 71% of the UK’s total trade with the Commonwealth. I would like to see total trade grow, obviously, but I would also like to see it much more widely spread right across the Commonwealth.

In 2020, as my hon. Friend pointed out, we have the next Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Rwanda. In addition there will be the Commonwealth Business Forum, which, I am pleased to say, the Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council will again be organising. That is a huge opportunity to truly display the strengths and the potential of often-overlooked Commonwealth markets. Rwanda should be praised for its commitment to gender equality—that is important after our previous debate. Only Iceland compares to Rwanda’s gender pay gap. No other country’s Parliament approaches Rwanda’s gender balance of 68% female MPs, and 26% of Rwandan small and medium-sized enterprises are run by women. Those statistics would also have stood well in the previous debate.

Rwanda also ranks within Africa’s four least corrupt nations, according to Transparency International, placing it—amazingly—above Italy. When we think where Rwanda has come from, that is a truly extraordinary position for it to be in. To say nothing else, the fact that such an independently successful nation with no historical connection to the United Kingdom would choose to join the organisation as recently as 2009 speaks to the understood value of the union to those who take advantage of it. I am always particularly pleased that the French are always looking at the Commonwealth to see how they can do their equivalent—which is a poor equivalent—better.

The question that we all have to ask ourselves is one that we should ask ourselves of everything: if something does not exist, should we invent it? Should we invent the Commonwealth, if it did not exist? I think that not only should we invent it, but we should spend much more time talking about and supporting it. I believe that the opportunities are huge. We can do more for the smaller Commonwealth nations, representing them at the UN on the Security Council. When we leave the EU, there will still be two EU countries—Cyprus and Malta—that are also Commonwealth countries. The United Kingdom must be careful not to over-dominate the Commonwealth, but at the same time it must show leadership. The potential is absolutely huge. This is a Commonwealth of nations of people who wish one another good will, who wish to share education and values, and who want to trade with one another. We can do much, much more and it is in our interests so to do.

4.4 pm

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) and to have supported the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) in his application to the Backbench Business Committee, which I thank for granting this debate. I serve as vice chair of the CPA UK branch and was pleased to support the application.

This is the 70th year of the Commonwealth, and in that time we have done much to be proud of. The Commonwealth remains a force for good and for international co-operation and provides an opportunity to develop a positive future, and the UK has a role to play in that. I am pleased to see the Minister showing leadership through the UK’s role in chairing the Commonwealth in this current period.
[David Hanson]

There are 53 countries in the Commonwealth and 2.3 billion people, but the challenges we face are symptomatic of some of the major challenges in the world at large: concerns about sustainability and climate change and the need to develop a positive programme; the challenge of chronic poverty and promoting opportunity for all, particularly for women, in Commonwealth countries; the international challenges of cyber-security, prevention of terrorism and modern slavery; and the opportunities to continue to develop trade and investment across the Commonwealth and to welcome it from Commonwealth countries into the UK.

We asked the Backbench Business Committee for this debate to discuss ways of achieving action on some of those common challenges and threats, and I ask that the Minister focus on that in her remarks. We want the Government, particularly in their current role, to report back on progress towards meeting those objectives, particularly on sustainability, the oceans and the prevention of plastic pollution, a fairer future, girls education, advancing human rights, reforming discriminatory legislation, securing a more secure future, particularly around cyber-security and modern slavery, and harnessing trade and investment. I want to see progress on all those issues.

The Minister will know that the Foreign Secretary laid a statement in the House on 14 January with several progress statements on how the Government were approaching some of those key issues. It is important today to focus on how we are trying to achieve some of the clear international objectives the Commonwealth has set, particularly on quality education for girls by 2030, the Pacific Commonwealth equality project and the Commonwealth blue charter on protecting and developing sustainable oceans. We are on track to achieve several of those objectives, but I would welcome an update from the Minister. Indeed, I would like quarterly progress reports on the objectives the Commonwealth has agreed and on which the UK Government take a particular lead.

I want to highlight one aspect of the Commonwealth’s activities that we in the UK branch are undertaking in partnership with other Commonwealth countries: tackling modern slavery. In addition to being vice chair of the CPA UK, I chair its modern slavery implementation group, which has been well supported by UK Government funds, particularly from the Home Office, and is investing in supporting and promulgating positive action on modern slavery across the Commonwealth. Of the 40 million people around the world who are victims of modern slavery, 71% are women and 55% reside in Commonwealth countries, so the Commonwealth has a key role to play in tackling modern slavery.

Through the project the UK branch is undertaking, we have—I hope—helped to generate discussion on how to use the UK’s lead on modern slavery to support Parliaments and Governments across the Commonwealth to take action. I pay particular tribute to Adeline Dumoulin, an official at the CPA, and her team who are working on this issue. We have had support from the Home Office for projects targeting Uganda, Ghana, Nigeria, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. In 2018-2020, the target countries will be Uganda, Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Malawi, Namibia, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

We are trying to work with Commonwealth parliamentarians to generate legislation on modern slavery and to stop criminal gangs taking action. The CPA UK branch has supported three Parliaments in the past year, in Nigeria, Pakistan and Uganda. I went to Uganda to meet parliamentarians there. I am pleased to report not only that we have deepened the knowledge of parliamentarians, who have also brought their own experiences to modern slavery, but that Members of the Ugandan, Ghanaian and Nigerian Parliaments have drafted anti-slavery legislation. I am hopeful that, in co-operation, we will be able to take action in those countries, at least, in the very near future.

A legislative drafting seminar will be held in the House of Commons between 26 and 29 March, and will be attended by parliamentarians from countries including Uganda, Ghana, Nigeria, Malawi, Namibia, Kenya, Bangladesh and Pakistan. We will look at how we can learn from them, because they will bring great expertise to the table, and also at how we can continue to work together to tackle the issue of modern slavery.

The CPA does great work, both in the UK branch and internationally. It has common ideals and objectives. If the Minister can report on what happens with CHOGM and how we are progressing, that would be very positive, but I think we should be proud of the work that we do, and continue to build on it in the next 12 months.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I shall have to drop the speaking limit to six minutes.

4.11 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge), and to all the Members who have spoken so far. The debate has featured a common theme, namely the values that all Commonwealth countries share. That is reflected in the tremendous work that the CPA does in promoting the Commonwealth, which itself promotes friendship and co-operation between 2.4 billion people in 53 countries across the globe. That is built on our people, our shared values and our shared history. Millions of people who live in our country have strong connections with one or more Commonwealth countries. We have shared identities through our families, our diasporas and our ancestors.

I think that there can be no greater example of global Britain than the work that we undertake through the Commonwealth. That brings me to a number of themes. One, about which we have already heard, is trade, along with investment and markets. There is no doubt that the current perception of intra-Commonwealth trade activity, and of our own country’s trade links with the rest of the Commonwealth, needs to move on. We should recognise that it is no longer about the past; we need look at the future and tomorrow’s trends. We must revitalise our understanding, and acknowledge that the modern Commonwealth is no longer about a uniform group of “developing countries”—a phrase which, in my view, is becoming increasingly outdated.

We should embrace what are now some of the fastest-growing and most high-technology economies on the planet, alongside—as we have already heard—one of the smallest and most vulnerable. We must cover a range of issues including skills, technology, innovation
and education, but also, at the other end of the spectrum, some of the challenges that small and vulnerable states face from climate change. That means that we must change some of our assumptions. It is not always a case of the UK providing support in some of the more conventional ways. We should recognise that some of the largest economies are becoming prime sources of capital and market growth, and we are now relying on them for investment, trade and growth opportunities. Digital, knowledge-based and service-based patterns are now generating more than half the total wealth of international commerce, and the Commonwealth has a role in that.

I want to touch on one Commonwealth country with which we have very strong links, although they could be even stronger. I can speak of that country with some personal knowledge. It is, of course, India, which, although it is the cradle of civilisation, is also a young country: half its population are under 25. More than 1 million people enter the job market every month. It is, of course, the youngest workforce the world has ever seen, and, building on our shared values, our shared heritage and some of our personal links with the diaspora community, there is much more we can do together to recognise the role of one of the largest and fastest growing economies in the world. It also brings a new perspective to a modern and developing Commonwealth. After all, half the population of the Commonwealth is Indian, so we must broaden some of the ways in which we work together.

People everywhere in the world are on the move as never before and the Commonwealth can collectively provide some new answers and solutions to issues such as how we can provide and accommodate better educational transfer between our countries, how we can support new business regimes and visas across Commonwealth countries, and how we can ease some of the current restrictions on our people-to-people movements. At the same time, there are enormous opportunities, which colleagues have already touched on. They range from disease eradication to some of the climate change issues we face as well as fighting for women and girls and standing up for all the issues in the rights agenda and the equality agenda. We must not just focus on securing trade and security prospects and on wider global patterns of influence. We must recognise also that there are some key characteristics we can all bring together that demonstrate where we can build on the right shared values as we enter a new chapter, not just in our nation’s history, but also in terms of foreign and economic policy priorities.

My message to the Government is this: let us make sure that we put our friendships and partnerships within the Commonwealth at the forefront of what we do, while at the same time ensuring that we support Commonwealth nations as they seek to build their own growth, prosperity and success in the future.

4.16 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I want to focus today on a matter that has already been mentioned: the adoption at CHOGM last year of the Commonwealth blue charter. Some Commonwealth countries are among those most affected by our failure to tackle what we should now call the climate emergency. We have heard of droughts in the Caribbean, Australia and many parts of Africa, sea level rises in Bangladesh causing flooding, loss of livelihoods, and what could become the climate migration of more than 20 million displaced people.

In 2013 it was reported that in Tanzania, Mount Kilimanjaro’s shrinking northern glaciers, which are thought to be 10,000 years old, could disappear by 2030. In fact forecasts show that both Mount Kenya and Mount Kilimanjaro could be without ice within a decade. But I want to talk today mostly about the Commonwealth’s small island states, many of which are already vulnerable on a number of fronts—their size, their remoteness, and their narrow resource and export base. They are now increasingly being affected by climate change and extreme weather events.

In the Caribbean, islands are experiencing more intense hurricanes, coastal erosion and rising sea levels, and their fisheries are also highly vulnerable to climate change. In Kiribati in the Pacific the shorelines are being pounded away by high tides: whole villages are having to be relocated, food crops are being destroyed, and freshwater supplies are contaminated by sea water.

In the Indian ocean, around the Seychelles and Mauritius much of the coral reef has been lost to bleaching. If sea levels rise by 1 metre, the Maldives, which was in the Commonwealth until a few years ago and may yet return, will disappear entirely.

Climate change is not the only environmental threat. There has been a very welcome rise in public and political awareness of plastic pollution in recent years. Richard Branson recently led a dive expedition to the bottom of the beautiful Blue Hole in Belize, which is 400 feet deep, and found plastic bottles. In his blog he wrote that

“the real monsters facing the ocean are climate change—and plastic. Sadly, we saw plastic bottles at the bottom of the hole, which is a real scourge of the ocean. We’ve all got to get rid of single-use plastic.”

I have dived in Belize and it remains the most beautiful place that I have dived. I have not been to the bottom of the Blue Hole but I can pay testament to just how upsetting it is to see man-made pollution wrecking the marine environment.

Other threats the oceans face include ocean acidification, which has been described as the “evil twin” of global warming, and unsustainable fishing, whether over-fishing or environmentally damaging pulse fishing and bottom trawling. There is also a real issue with waste disposal in small island states. They do not have space for landfill, so where do they put the rubbish? With the ban from China, and with Malaysia now refusing to take waste, including that from the UK, that issue has become an ever more pressing problem.

For many of these small island states, there is a conflict between immediate economic needs and environmental protection. In the Seychelles, for example, the fisheries sector is the second largest industry after tourism, and 95% of its exports are fish products such as canned tuna. The Seychelles also have amazing biodiversity, especially round Aldabra, the world’s second largest coral atoll. Six plant studies students from Oxford University have just gone out there, along with six Seychellois students, to do a three to five-week plastic clean-up project, and I am looking forward to hearing what they report back.
In a recent debt-for-nature deal with a US conservation group, $21 million of Seychelles debt was written off in return for the island nation committing to designating 30% of its waters as marine protected areas. That sounds like a great initiative. With the help of the World Bank, the Seychelles have also raised $15 million through the world’s first sovereign blue bond, which is designed to support sustainable marine and fisheries initiatives. Again, these are examples of the positive things that are happening to help the small island states, but we need to move faster.

It is quite depressing to look back at past efforts to address these issues. In 1994, the first meeting of the small island developing states on sustainable development was held in Barbados, and it resulted in a 14-point programme of action. The first listed priority area was climate change and sea level rise, followed by natural and environmental disasters, management of waste, coastal and marine resources, freshwater resources and more, but that was 25 years ago, and it does not feel as though much progress has been made since then—certainly not enough.

It was 10 years ago, before the Copenhagen climate summit, that the then President of the Maldives, Mohamed Nasheed, held an underwater Cabinet meeting to highlight the impact of rising sea levels. He warned that with a 2° rise in temperatures, his country would be “on death row”, yet it is only in the past year or so that it is 2° rise in temperatures, his country would be “on death row”, yet it is only in the past year or so that it is becoming accepted that limiting temperature rises to 2° would not be sufficient to address the climate emergency, and that 1.5° should be the target.

I hope that the discussions at CHOGM 2018 will represent a much greater step forward. It was acknowledged at CHOGM that temperature and sea level rises, and other aspects of climate change, posed a significant risk to many of the Commonwealth’s most vulnerable member countries, and that climate change could push an additional 100 million people into poverty by 2030. There was renewed support for a target well below 2°, along with support for innovative financing solutions including disaster risk insurance, which is important for farmers affected by climate change. It was agreed to establish action groups on ocean issues led by Commonwealth member countries, and for the secretariat to take forward the Commonwealth blue charter. The UK is the chair of CHOGM until Rwanda takes over in two years’ time, and I really hope that we will be in the forefront of pushing this forward.

4.22 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): It is a privilege to be the tail-end Charlie in this debate on the Commonwealth on its 70th anniversary, with the UK in the chair and only a day or two before Commonwealth Day. The theme during the UK’s period in the chair has been a connected Commonwealth. I hope that one thing that will come out of this debate is that we will all feel more connected to this place, and indeed to all places, because this Chamber, which was rebuilt after the war, in 1950, has benefited hugely from the contributions of individual Commonwealth members. Let me highlight some of them.

Given that Australia’s former Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, was in this Chamber yesterday, it is worth starting with the Speaker’s Chair in which you are sitting, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is made of blackbean wood—or Moreton Bay chestnut—from Ravenshoe in northern Queensland, and it was made by H. H. Martyn and Co in my neighbouring constituency of Cheltenham in Gloucestershire, as were the Dispatch Boxes in front of the Minister and her Opposition counterpart. They are made from puriri wood from New Zealand. The chairs at the Clerks’ Table are, or were, from South Africa. They were made from blank stinkwood. The Table is in Canadian oak and was made by the Globe Furniture Company in Ontario. The south entrance door is of English oak but was the gift of Pakistan.

There are contributions from almost all the other Commonwealth nations, either in this Chamber or just outside it. They include mayflower wood from Belize, silver gilt inksstands from Bermuda and a silver gilt ashtray from Botswana. Those gifts came from all over the world to the mother of all Parliaments, and it is striking that many of them are in the woods of those Commonwealth nations. The woods from Africa include gold walnut from Sierra Leone, iroko wood from elsewhere in Africa and mvule from Uganda. All the designs were put together by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, but it was the generosity of other Commonwealth nations that helped to resurrect our own Chamber. It is poignant today to look at the silver gilt inksstands with stationery racks, which are in front of the Minister. They were a gift of Zimbabwe, a nation that is currently outside the Commonwealth. That fact is a source of huge disappointment to the many of us who had hoped for successful untarnished elections last year as the gateway to re-entry. Alas, it was not to be, and we all hope that things will improve there.

I turn from heritage to the present day. It is particularly appropriate for this debate to be on the same day as our International Women’s Day debate, given that the first and most important goal of our chairmanship of the Commonwealth is to ensure that by 2030 its members provide 12 years of quality education for girls. It is worth highlighting the other three goals. The UK is making great progress with the Commonwealth blue charter, particularly around Ascension Island. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) has referred to harnessing trade and investment, and to the work of the Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council; 8% of our trade is with the Commonwealth. Lastly, on cyber-security co-operation, the UK has pledged to fund 10 national cyber-security reviews by next year. That is vital for all members of the Commonwealth.

Other work is being done. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) has played a key role in the anti-malaria campaign, which is funded not least by generous charities such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Members of the royal family have done much to support other initiatives, such as Commonwealth scholars and the work of the Royal Commonwealth Society, which—here I declare an interest—supported the all-party group for the Commonwealth, which I founded a few years ago. It still works very closely with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge), who has done so much in the CPA along with our colleagues the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) and the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson), is leading progress on that.
I want to touch on the contribution of accountable parliamentary democracies to the Commonwealth. Finding out what more can be done to strengthen that is the overarching aim and ambition of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, which I currently have the privilege of chairing. Democracy is having a rocky time globally. The rise of populism and nationalism, the vagaries of climate change, volatile governance and far too much civil conflict have caused huge dislocation of populations. Alongside more sophisticated technology for rigging elections, there is a greater questioning of democratic government than perhaps there has been at any point in our lifetime. There is a temptation to believe that single-party autocratic regimes could be a way forward.

All democracies, whether they were planted 1,000 years ago or 10 years ago, are fragile plants. They need careful nurturing. The UK’s democratic constant gardener is the WFD, which is funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development. Both are admirably represented by the Minister, who has been very supportive of the work of the foundation. We focus on advancing inclusive and accountable democracy. The Commonwealth partnership for democracy—the CP4D, as it is known—which includes several bodies, is helping to bring democracies alive by making them more representative, with more women, more young people, more people with disabilities and more religious minorities. Those are things that autocracies can never offer. I went to a conference in Kuala Lumpur last month, and it was brilliant; there was, I think; also one in Fiji last month; and there was another one in Uganda last week. Those things are making a real difference. Further Government support for the Commonwealth can only help to nurture democracy in one of the most special networks in the world.

4.28 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship in this House, Mr Deputy Speaker, as I do very often. I extend my thanks to the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) for securing this important debate, and to the Minister for her continued passion and unwavering commitment to her duties.

The title of this debate is “The Modern Commonwealth: Opportunities and Challenges”, and in the short time that I have I want to focus on the challenges. In my role as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion and belief, I—alongside many hon. Members and colleagues from the other place—stand up for the right to hold and practise one’s faith in peace, or indeed to have no faith at all. Unfortunately, in some parts of the Commonwealth, as in the rest of the world, that right is increasingly under threat. Open Doors UK and Ireland this year produced a fantastic report detailing the worsening persecution that Christians face around the world, simply for being Christian. According to the report, up to 245 million Christians are discriminated against in countries across the world. As many of those countries are members of the Commonwealth, I would like to discuss one of the most important challenges facing the Commonwealth: how to protect the right to freedom of religion or belief.

To illustrate the depth and breadth of this challenge, I will discuss violations of the freedom of religion or belief in three countries, starting with Pakistan, which I visited last year.

When I was in Pakistan, I heard how Christians and other religious minorities are systematically discriminated against in education and employment, with even Government Departments failing to meet quotas and advertising sanitation work as exclusively for Christians. They should implement the 5% job allocation. For goodness’ sake, give those people a chance to gain the education so they can get better jobs.

The Movement for Solidarity and Peace estimates that at least 1,000 Hindu and Christian girls a year are kidnapped, forced to convert and forcibly married, or sometimes sold into prostitution, in Pakistan. Christians and other religious minorities face all manner of societal discrimination, harassment and physical attacks, sometimes resulting in death.

According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal, there have been more than 5,000 deaths in Pakistan due to sectarian violence since 1989. Such intercommunal violence is also common in India. The rise of the nationalist Hindutva ideology, which defines being “Indian” as being Hindu, is leading to increased religious oppression and attacks against minorities. According to data from the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs, there was a 28% rise in communal violence between 2014 and 2017. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom reported some 300 attacks on Christians in 2015 alone.

Other worrying developments in India include the Indian Government effectively stripping 4 million people in Assam state, mostly Muslims, of their citizenship, branding them as illegal immigrants from neighbouring Bangladesh. This move bears worrying similarities to the plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar, who have also been denied their citizenship.

In Nigeria, sadly, things are not much better. According to the “Global Terrorism Index”, violence between Christian farmers and Muslim herders has led to over 60,000 deaths since 2001. Christian Solidarity Worldwide reports that more than 1,000 Christians were killed in violence during the first quarter of 2018 alone. That is to say nothing of Boko Haram, which is still very active. Just a few weeks ago, human rights organisations such as CSW marked the first anniversary of the day a young Christian girl, Leah Sharibu, was captured by Boko Haram, alongside over 100 of her school friends. Ahead of International Women’s Day, it is important to remember that that young girl is still imprisoned. Whereas all the others were released, Leah was kept for refusing to give up her Christian faith, and she remains in captivity today.

The issues I have mentioned today are, unfortunately, just the tip of the iceberg. According to the Pew Research Centre, 70% of people living in Commonwealth countries face high or extremely high Government restrictions on their right to freedom of religion or belief. Worse still, 88% face high or very high social hostility simply for holding minority beliefs. This is a major challenge that must be met head-on.

Although protecting the right to freedom of religion or belief is the right thing to do for its own sake, developing social and societal respect for different religions and beliefs is vital to reducing conflict, building stability and encouraging economic growth. Failure to protect
freedom of religion or belief can be disastrous. Although it is an extreme case, the plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar teaches us how unaddressed Government and social persecution towards religious groups can explode into violence, undermining stability and creating humanitarian crisis.

That is why I ask the Minister to encourage our Commonwealth partners to make promoting freedom of religion or belief a priority and to make funding available for non-governmental organisations to work on behalf of persecuted Christians and other religious or belief minorities. I also ask her to work with other Commonwealth nations to safely develop a statistical database of violations of the freedom of religion or belief, and other data on religious or belief communities, to support policy making.

I thank the Minister for the contribution she will make shortly and for her support on the many things I have brought to her attention. I look forward to hearing her response.

4.34 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) on securing this debate. I share with him a lot of interest in this issue and in wider issues, on a range of all-party groups. It is very timely to be having this debate before Commonwealth Day on Monday and nearly a year after the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting took place here in London. We are marking the 70th anniversary of the modern Commonwealth of Nations. As he said at the start, it was constituted by the London declaration in 1949, building on previous constitutions, and reflecting the process of decolonisation and a willingness of the newly independent countries to continue to co-operate and develop a new and more positive relationship with the UK, as the former colonial power.

As the debate has reflected, there is renewed interest in the Commonwealth in many quarters as preparations for some shape or form of Brexit continue. It is therefore right that the Members who applied for the debate wanted to look at both the challenges and the opportunities facing the Commonwealth, which in some respects reflect those facing the wider global community, and the multilateral rules-based order in particular.

In 1949, the world was still very much in flux. Many of the multilateral or supranational organisations we know today were still in their infancy or did not even exist. Today, the marketplace is considerably more crowded, so making sure that the voice of the Commonwealth is heard and that a relevance is maintained is a challenge, both to the institution and to the member states. Another challenge was described well by Lord Anderson of Swansea: distinguishing between the “Commonwealth of declaration” and the “Commonwealth of reality”.

Proclaiming support for human rights, transparency, democracy and equality is one thing, but putting them into practice is another. The legacy of ancient colonial laws, not least the criminalisation of the LGBT community in many Commonwealth countries, stands in contrast to many of the proclamations that are made.

As was said by the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), with whom I serve on the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, democracy building is still a challenge in many countries. There are countries that are still, in effect, one-party states or elective dictatorships. Those in the Chamber will be astonished to hear that some Commonwealth countries still include hereditary members of the aristocracy in their legislatures. These countries include Tonga, Lesotho and a small island state known as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Perhaps there will be some progress there in due course. The Commonwealth has also not been without structural and institutional challenges in terms of governance, internal accountability and the role of the secretariat.

However, we should not let striving for perfection be the enemy of the good that is already being done. The Commonwealth provides the hooks on which a range of worthwhile initiatives—I believe the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East said there were more than 80—can be hung. Many Members have shared experiences of our work with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. I had the privilege of serving on its executive between 2015 and 2017, and have met many delegations here in Westminster. I also had the privilege of travelling to Uganda in 2016 to work with committee chairs and, last year, to Rwanda as part of preliminary outreach with its Parliament as the country prepares to host CHOGM and take on the role of chair-in-office thereafter.

As we have heard, Rwanda is a relatively new member of the Commonwealth and it was not historically part of the British empire. Clearly the Commonwealth does offer some advantages through membership, even to new countries.

Monday marks Commonwealth Day, and the theme of a connected Commonwealth will drive activities that day and throughout the year. These events, activities and gatherings can help young people, in particular, to understand their roles as global citizens and promote solidarity around the world. The theme of a connected Commonwealth and protecting the oceans, as we heard about from the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), is hugely important and very relevant, in looking at our common responsibility to protect and maintain the oceans, whether that is through reducing plastic pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, or by promoting biodiversity and the conservation of sea life.

The UK has a particular role to play, not just for the rest of this year as the chair-in-office, but with the Queen remaining the head of the Commonwealth. It was agreed at CHOGM last year that she would be succeeded by her son, the Duke of Rothesay, as we know him in Scotland, in due course. The UK must recognise its colonial legacy, and ultimately if it seeks to lead, it must lead by example. If it seeks to drive positive social change in Commonwealth member states, it must ensure that people here in the UK are not being left behind, whether as a result of welfare reform or a hostile immigration environment. Platiitudes from the new Home Secretary are not enough; action is needed to demonstrate that the UK truly is a welcoming place for our friends from Commonwealth countries, whether they are applying for visas simply to visit friends and family, whether they are newly choosing to make their homes here or whether, like the Windrush generation, they have lived here for decades. Likewise, on climate change and tackling pollution, the UK must always be setting the most ambitious goals that others might follow.
One of the most ambitious and visible aspects of Commonwealth life is the Commonwealth games. It is a source of enduring pride for my city of Glasgow that we hosted the 20th Commonwealth games in 2014. We were blessed with glorious weather for almost the full fortnight and witnessed world-class sportsmanship in an atmosphere of welcome and exuberance, and the legacy in terms of physical infrastructure and the good will that was generated was there to see. I am proud to sport the Commonwealth tartan in my tie today.

Of course, in 2014 we were also debating the opportunity for Scotland to take its place as an independent member of the Commonwealth of nations. That remains the goal of my party and a growing share of Scotland’s population. The “Scotland’s Future” White Paper repeatedly referenced Scotland’s ambition to become a good global citizen and play an active role in the Commonwealth. There is this idea that Scottish independence is somehow about insularity or isolation, but in fact the complete opposite is the case: we want to play our part as part of the global family of nations. As Winnie Ewing once famously said:

“Stop the world, Scotland wants to get on.”

There are challenges but also opportunities for the Commonwealth, and I look forward to Scotland’s playing its part in meeting them to the fullest extent possible over the next 70 years.

4.40 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady). It is also a pleasure to speak for the Opposition in this important debate in this, the 70th year of the Commonwealth.

Many excellent speeches and points have been made about the opportunities and challenges that face the Commonwealth. The hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) made the point about the important work of the CPA in ensuring our good relations with the Commonwealth.

My hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) talked about the need to keep up the momentum following CHOGM 2018, and to harness that into a revitalised Commonwealth fit for the 21st century. She also talked about the involvement of women in Parliaments.

The right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) talked about the growth in the economies of Commonwealth countries and Rwanda’s particular commitment to gender equality, which is very appropriate in the light of the fact that it is International Women’s Day tomorrow. My right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) raised issues relating to sustainability, climate change, poverty, cyber-security and modern slavery, to name just a few.

The right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel) talked about the changing face of the Commonwealth and the fast-growing economies of some of its countries, particularly India. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) talked about the urgent need to tackle climate change and plastic pollution, and about the adoption of the Commonwealth blue charter.

The hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) gave us a tour of the different gifts given to this place by Commonwealth countries, thereby highlighting the special nature of our relationship. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) focused on the persecution of Christians in some Commonwealth countries and the need to concentrate on ensuring that rights to freedom of religion or belief are not further eroded but are addressed using our Commonwealth partnership and power.

The Commonwealth encompasses a diverse range of countries, and I wish to inject a cautionary note into the talk about increasing our trade with the Commonwealth. Let me use Australia as an example. Australia has become a much more multicultural nation, with 46% of the population either born overseas or having one parent who was born overseas. The Australian population looks at a post-Brexit world through the lens of an increasingly non-British-affiliated population. Many Australians see the future of their country as being focused on Asia rather than the UK, as evidenced by the recent free trade agreement with Indonesia. Although our cultural ties with Australia are still strong, Australia’s economic focus appears to be elsewhere.

Despite the Prime Minister’s high-profile speech at the summit, in which she apologised for the colonial imposition of anti-LGBT laws that still persist in many Commonwealth countries, there was no follow-up agreement among attendees to do away with those laws or, indeed, to begin to address the discrimination faced by the LGBT community in many Commonwealth countries.

The Commonwealth’s annual theme for this year, 2019, is, “A connected Commonwealth”. That theme encourages collaboration among the people, the Governments and the institutions of the Commonwealth to protect natural resources and promote inclusive economic empowerment so that all people—particularly women, young people and marginalised communities—can benefit equally. That builds on the goals agreed at CHOGM 2018, most notably adopting the Commonwealth blue charter on sustainable development and protection of the world’s oceans; committing to ratify and implement the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women; and the adoption of the Commonwealth cyber declaration, with a common commitment to an open, democratic, peaceful and secure internet, respecting human rights and freedom of expression.

The Commonwealth faces many challenges: job creation, trade, ending absolute poverty, tackling climate change and making progress on achieving the sustainable development goals by the target year of 2030. Across the Commonwealth, we have ongoing human rights or instability issues in countries such as Bangladesh, Cameroon and Pakistan. We have had the recent clashes in Kashmir between Commonwealth partners India and Pakistan, and the recent violence and instability in Zimbabwe, which expressed the wish to be readmitted to the Commonwealth following the fall of Mugabe.

There are many challenges. Let us not forget the opportunities, but given that the size of our exports to all 52 Commonwealth countries in 2016 was similar to
the size of our exports to one EU country—Germany—we have a long way to go before our trade with the Commonwealth even begins to compensate for the loss of our customs union with the EU.

4.46 pm

The Minister for Africa (Harriet Baldwin): It is an absolute privilege to wind up for the Government in this very important debate marking the Commonwealth’s 70th anniversary. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) for securing the debate and to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this debate just a few days before Commonwealth Day. I pay tribute to everyone who spoke in the debate—I thought that we had a range of excellent speeches—and particularly to those who work on the executive of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.

I will pick out a few of the themes that came up in a range of speeches. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East, in a wide-ranging speech, talked about the very valuable work done by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. The hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) managed very cleverly to link the two debates this afternoon with her focus on women in Parliament, on climate and on LGBT issues. On the specific point that she made about the status change, the business case for which is currently with the Government, I can say that that is with our protocol and legal teams for review.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) made an excellent speech, and one that I hope to emulate by presenting the importance of that fast growth in Africa and the trade opportunities that that presents. The right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) rightly talked about climate change. He asked for a quarterly update. I cannot say that I can promise that at this point, but I can say that the work is there if he wants to probe further on that through the other means available to him. He largely spent his speech focusing on the incredibly important issue of modern slavery and the really valuable work that the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association is able to take forward with legislators from—I think—40 different countries.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) talked about the future and the importance of focusing on the youth of the Commonwealth, which has such a young population. She highlighted the situation in India. The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) made a really important contribution, highlighting the value of the work that has been done across the Commonwealth on not only the Clean Oceans Alliance but climate change, and I shall touch a bit more on that very important issue as I go through my speech.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) gave a veritable tour of this Chamber. I certainly learned some things that I did not know before, and colleagues will want to read the id that he wrote in Harrods so that they can share that information with their constituents. I also pay tribute to him for his work as chair of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy.

The absolutely indefatigable hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made a passionate speech, as he always does, about his campaign passion—Christianity around the world, and the importance of freedom of religion and belief. We should recognise how much the Government are already doing in this area, but his important recommendations will inform that work. Many of the issues and conflicts that he mentioned also related to other matters raised in the debate, including climate change.

The hon. Members for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) and for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) made some important points about the role of the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth charter states that members are “opposed to all forms of discrimination, whether rooted in gender, race, colour, creed, political belief or other grounds.”

That is an important, all-encompassing statement that touches on a range of the topics raised today, and I will try to respond to all the issues raised in the time available to me.

As colleagues have pointed out, it is our two years as Commonwealth chair-in-office, and we are already working closely with our friends in Rwanda, given that they are hosting the next Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in 2020. The UK is unbreakably bound to the Commonwealth and its democratic values. As chair-in-office we are promoting those values, and we are working to help the Commonwealth realise its potential for prosperity, security, fairness and sustainability together. We are also working to tackle global challenges such as climate change, extremism and modern slavery, and to support small, fragile and vulnerable states. It is truly a remarkable organisation with a remarkable reach.

Our objectives can be summarised in four words: delivery, voice, solidarity and reform. Delivery is about implementing the ambitious commitments made at last year’s meetings to build a fairer, more sustainable, more prosperous and more secure Commonwealth. We cannot do this on our own, so our co-operation with the 52 fellow member states, the Commonwealth secretariat, and the many Commonwealth organisations and networks—many of which were mentioned in today’s debate—is crucial. The Government are delivering on those commitments with over £500 million of projects and programmes. We are making significant progress, and I would like to highlight a few examples.

To build a more sustainable future, the UK and Vanuatu together have established the Commonwealth Clean Oceans Alliance under the new Commonwealth blue charter. That work now includes 24 member states, which have committed themselves to concrete action to reduce the scourge of plastics in the oceans—an issue that I know concerns so many colleagues. With UK funds and expertise, the Commonwealth marine economies programme is promoting growth, innovation, investment and jobs while safeguarding healthy seas and ecosystems in 17 different Commonwealth island states.

To build a more secure future, UK-funded training events will benefit the cyber-security of 37 Commonwealth countries. We have established an African cyber-security fellowship network and have helped nine African countries to develop an information infrastructure protection. To build a more prosperous future, we are promoting connectivity and inclusive growth. Earlier this week, we announced that

“opposed to all forms of discrimination, whether rooted in gender, race, colour, creed, political belief or other grounds.”
we would co-lead with South Africa the digital connectivity element of the Commonwealth connectivity agenda. Over 2,300 women-owned businesses have joined the UK-funded Commonwealth SheTrades programme for women entrepreneurs. And, propelling Commonwealth trade, the Commonwealth standards network, which was launched in September, now has 38 members.

To build a fairer future, we are providing over £200 million of support for girls’ education in nine Commonwealth countries. We are supporting collaboration between civil society and Commonwealth countries wishing to address legislation that discriminates on the grounds of sex, sexual orientation and gender identity.

We are funding programmes to drive inclusive and accountable democracy. I have highlighted the work of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy and paid tribute to the Commonwealth Local Government Forum, which does fantastic work. I must commend the work that the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association has done through its updated recommended benchmarks for democratic legislatures. It was wonderful to hear what my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East said about the number and energy of the visits that we have had, outward and inward, over the past 12 months.

Our second objective as chair-in-office is to ensure that the voice of the Commonwealth is heard. Aside from the United Nations, no other group of nations encompasses such a range of countries from all continents. This huge diversity is both an opportunity and a strength. At the UN General Assembly last year, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister advocated for the rules-based international system on behalf of all 53 Commonwealth Heads of Government. It was the first time that this collective voice had been heard in the General Assembly in this way.

Our third objective is to strengthen collaboration between Commonwealth members in international organisations by ensuring that we know about each other’s candidacies in international elections; briefing each other on the business of bodies to which we do not all belong; and supporting, as the UK does, the Commonwealth small states offices in New York and in Geneva.

Our final objective with Commonwealth partners is to refresh the governance of the Commonwealth secretariat and its collaboration with other organisations. In fact, the board of governors is meeting today to discuss that, and we hope that Foreign Ministers will soon approve its recommendations. We welcome the secretary-general’s appointment last week of Dr Arjoon Suddhoo from Mauritius as deputy secretary-general. We very much look forward to working with him.

Moving on to Rwanda, I am delighted that the next Heads of Government meeting will take place in Africa. The Rwandan Government are preparing for CHOGM 2020 with enormous energy. I am confident that our successful pursuit of the Commonwealth’s potential will continue seamlessly with the Kigali meeting.

We are determined to make the most of our two years as chair-in-office, to ensure that a modern Commonwealth can meet future challenges, from climate change to cyber-attack, and to seize the opportunities flowing from the organisation’s huge diversity and enormous global reach. We have made important progress, but there is a huge agenda and lots more to do. We will work tirelessly to build a fairer, more sustainable, more prosperous and more secure Commonwealth. The fact that countries wish to join and to rejoin the Commonwealth, as Gambia did last year and as the Maldives wishes to do now, demonstrates its value. We must realise that value to the full. I am delighted to recommend that all members of the Commonwealth take the opportunity to read the debate that we have had this afternoon.

4.57 pm

James Duddridge: I thank everybody who has spoken in this debate. One thing that strikes me is how different each contribution has been, which perhaps represents the diversity within the Commonwealth. I neglected to place an advert for the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association challenge fund for Members who want to do something that is not in its programme. Members can apply to its exec and we will try to fund and support specific activities that they want to pursue.

Next week is not Brexit week—it is Commonwealth Day and Commonwealth Week. If I can mention one speech, it is that of my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire), who said that this is not about a day or a week; we should be debating the Commonwealth day in, day out. It is a third of the world. They are our partners, they are around us, and in some cases we are sat upon their gifts. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate and, again, Members who have spoken.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered opportunities and challenges facing the modern Commonwealth in its 70th year.
New Ferry Regeneration

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Iain Stewart.)

5 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I thank Mr Speaker for granting this Adjournment debate. I want to discuss a matter that is very important to me, my constituents and all those in Merseyside, and that is the situation in New Ferry.

New Ferry is a small town I represent, and it also happens to be the place where I live and where my office is. It is very important to all my constituents. I am glad to say that the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), has visited New Ferry, which we were grateful for. Nearly two years ago the town suffered a most terrible explosion.

At just after 9 o’clock on a Saturday evening on 25 March, there was a huge blast. This is an ongoing matter before the courts, so I will not discuss the specifics of the explosion, but I want to say a few words about New Ferry as a place. The Minister knows New Ferry, as he has visited it, but many others will not be aware of what it is like. I want to talk about the response to that explosion, the situation we are now in and the rebuilding of New Ferry, and ask the Minister some questions.

New Ferry is a small town on the Wirral peninsula in Merseyside. It is just south of Birkenhead. For many years, it was a place where ferries stopped, hence its name; long ago, the Mersey ferries stopped there. It was a town where people would go shopping. There used to be a number of hotels and other historic buildings, but over time, the ferries ceased calling there, and it just became a place where people would go to shop. This will be a familiar story. As with lots of our high streets up and down the country, the change in New Ferry has been significant, particularly over the past 20 years. The onset of out-of-town shopping and then the impact of the internet has hit New Ferry just as it has hit many other places.

Before the blast two years ago, we already had a big challenge in New Ferry. We had used the coalition Government’s initiative of having a town team to try to get more shops into New Ferry and more events happening that would bring people into the town centre. Local people put lots of effort into that. We had arts and cultural events in New Ferry, but nothing really stuck because the quality of many buildings was very poor, as it is now. It was hard to get small businesses to use those buildings and bring them back to life.

The place was crying out for investment, and then two years ago we had the terrible event of the huge explosion. The community was struggling with the fact that the place they loved and had grown up in was no longer somewhere they could go shopping to buy fruit and veg or a loaf of bread. Lots of businesses had closed down already. Major supermarkets had left, and we had seen the last bank in the town close.

I had already been campaigning for regeneration when the blast happened. As I said, I am not able to talk about the details because of the legal situation. However, I want to put this on the record. As the Minister knows, the blast was extraordinarily traumatic for the area. It had a big impact on people. One of the frustrations that people in New Ferry feel is that although, in the aftermath of the blast, they were listened to and people saw the pain that had been caused, the response has been too little and too slow. I turn now to that response.

After the blast, there was a question about whether Wirral Council would apply for the Bellwin scheme, but it was advised not to apply for funding from that scheme because the response required at that time did not hit the £500,000 threshold. There is a problem because, as I understand it, the rules of the scheme stipulate that the assessment of funds needed under the scheme had to be completed within four weeks. However, the site was completely unsafe, and it remained out of bounds for reasons of investigation for six weeks. In my opinion, the council was not properly in control of the scene, and it was not able to do what it would have needed to do under the Bellwin scheme. That was a problem, and it has been quite difficult to find out more about whether there are any exemptions under the scheme, or how this could be reopened.

I was glad that, in September 2018, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government received a delegation from New Ferry in his office here, and he listened carefully to what my constituents said. Unfortunately, in the letter he wrote to us after that meeting, he said that no change in the Government’s approach would be forthcoming, and that they were still not prepared to look again at the issue of the Bellwin scheme. That is really hard for my constituents to take. Given the level of cuts to Wirral Council, the situation that New Ferry was already in and the fact that it is really struggling, the idea that Wirral council tax payers should just pick up the entirety of the bill for what happened in New Ferry, through no fault of the people there, is one that my constituents find very difficult to understand. I am sure that the Minister will wish to comment on that.

I want to talk about the rebuilding of New Ferry. As I have said, the place needed regeneration long before the blast. It was crying out for it. I had spent hours and hours in meetings with potential developers—such as the Co-op supermarket, which owns one of the buildings—desperately trying to say to people that this could be a great place if they would be prepared to invest in it. Unfortunately, there had been change in the regeneration capital from the Government for New Ferry, and that has held the place back because commercial organisations must feel that it is too big a risk. It has always needed the state to step in, and that has never happened. It is happening now in a small way, but my complaint is that it is not being done quickly enough and we really need to see progress, because people in New Ferry are losing faith in that ever happening.

This is the situation as it is today. Homes England, which the Government charge with regeneration, has now spent about £100,000 on a plan and a study of how the rebuild should happen, but that means that we are still—two years on—only in the planning stage. I think most people, and certainly most people in Merseyside who drive through New Ferry, think it is actually a bit ridiculous that we have not been able to move this on faster. I really want to say to the Minister: this has got to happen more quickly.

The consultation options are out there, and people are talking about them. I would like to support an option that has been put forward by traders and residents that would see more rejuvenation of the town centre. They want better parking arrangements, which will help
with the footfall, and units of different sizes, so that we are not just reliant on big business coming in to rescue New Ferry, but can have small and developing businesses too, and I support that.

The city region is also trying to step in and help. Applications have been made to the town centre fund from the Liverpool city region. That is a really positive option that could help us with the town centre and make sure that we still keep a commercial heart, not just become a dormitory area. I think I know what the Minister is going to say, which is that we should rely on what the Liverpool city region is doing. I know that the Minister supports devolution, as I do, and that is fine.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): I support Liverpool too.

Alison McGovern: We both support Liverpool, and we both support devolution—but it is not really a good enough answer. When, through no fault of its own, Salisbury experienced terrible events that damaged its prosperity and possibilities, the Government found £2.5 million to assist it. I and my constituents, and indeed the public at large, do not understand why such support was not found for New Ferry. Put simply, if such resources could be allocated to New Ferry, rather than needing permanently to be bid for, asked for, or cobbled together from different sources, we could get that regeneration and rebuild under way. That is why it is slow. The Government have all the resources of the Treasury, and they could help people in New Ferry today.

I am grateful that the Minister came to meet people, and that the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government met my constituents, but that is not enough because we need actions, not just people listening. Will the Minister answer a simple question today? Can he commit capital, so that when we have finished the consultation on what the rebuild will look like, we will know that those plans will happen, and that we will not be stuck in the permanent state that I—and before me my predecessor, Ben Chapman—have been stuck in, with constant bidding rounds where money never comes forward? The plans are there, but they never seem to be realised to allow people to see the prospects of our town changing. That is what people want. They do not want any more plans and consultations; they want action.

In conclusion, across the road from my office in New Ferry is a block of derelict shops. Every time I walk to my office, I walk past those shops and I think about the impotence of politics, and about the lack of care and attention for the ordinary considerations of British people. The Minister knows this already, but I repeat that if he thinks I will ignore the dereliction and lack of care and attention in the town of New Ferry, or that I will stop coming to the House to badger the Government and ask them to do more, and to request action that is quicker and has more effect, he is wrong. Nobody in New Ferry will ever give up on the place that we love and care about. I will never give up asking the Minister, so he might as well just say yes today.

5.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): The hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) has made an impassioned plea on behalf of her constituents, and I pay tribute to her for her tenacity and for the regularity with which she has brought this important issue to the House. Her constituents should be proud of the service that she offers as a constituency Member of Parliament who cares passionately about the community she represents.

As the hon. Lady said, I visited New Ferry a couple of months after the initial explosion, and nobody who has been there—the hon. Lady visits every week when she walks to her office—could be anything other than moved by the devastation caused by the explosion. She is right to say that today we should not get into the details of how that explosion may have happened. There will, I hope, be a day of reckoning regarding the cause of the explosion, but it will not be today.

Immediately after the event the Government, as with all such incidents, deployed one of our liaison teams—we call it a RED team, as it covers resilience, emergencies and disasters—to work with Wirral Council and consider how to support it. The hon. Lady mentioned a good meeting with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, and residents and business owners from her area. She says that she will not ignore any dereliction of duty and that she will keep on fighting. I am sure that after that meeting she, like me, went away and reflected on the fact that in some areas Wirral Council had failed to react correctly and speedily enough on behalf of its constituents. It had a hardship fund at the time that could have been accessed, but it was not. I know a hardship fund has now been made available. At the time of the explosion, despite what the hon. Lady says about local authorities up and down the country being hard pushed in terms of public finances—and I accept that Wirral Council is one of them—the council did have some £68 million in unallocated reserves.

As well as pushing me on the Government’s response, I hope that the hon. Lady will continue to push Wirral Council. In the very moving meeting we held with the Secretary of State, it was absolutely clear that people felt that the initial response—what people often talk about immediately after such disasters—had simply not been good enough from Wirral Council, despite the support from the Government and the resilience and emergency division. There may be lessons for the Government to learn—I will come on to some of the ways in which we will continue to support the people of New Ferry—but there are also lessons for the local authority to learn. I will leave my remarks there, but if the hon. Lady would like to talk to me about that after this debate, I will happily do so privately.

The hon. Lady is absolutely correct to say that the regeneration of the site has been slower than any of us would have hoped for. Following my visit in June 2017, I immediately asked Homes England to make £100,000 available to work jointly with the local authority on a regeneration plan. Those plans, by their very nature, are complicated and take some time to work up. There was, however, a significant delay on that plan coming back to Government with any request for support.

I welcome the work that has been undertaken. There has been an opportunity for local residents to ensure that their views are heard. The council, in conjunction with Homes England, is now evaluating the comments from the feedback sessions that were held in New Ferry. Work is ongoing to find a preferred residential mix-use
development for New Ferry. I recognise what the hon. Lady says about the challenge facing high streets up and down the country. She makes the point extremely well that any regeneration in New Ferry must be of that mixed residential and commercial use for it to continue to be sustainable. In parallel to that, Wirral Council is planning to invest £1.3 million to start the land assembly of the New Ferry site, which will enable that exciting regeneration to take place.

On Government support, the hon. Lady has campaigned tirelessly to support the residents and businesses affected. She talks about the Salisbury nerve agent attack, an appalling national and international incident that saw the murder and attempted murder of people by foreign actors on British soil, and the support the Government made available to the people of the city of Salisbury. Such support is normally dealt with through a Bellwin scheme. The hon. Lady correctly says that the Bellwin scheme is for expenditure by Wirral Council, which is currently in excess of £495,000. At the time the discussions were taking place, Wirral Council estimated that it had spent only £400,000.

I would point out that following the explosion—the hon. Lady is absolutely correct—the site was in the hands of Merseyside police, who were, quite correctly, gathering evidence about any criminal acts that may or may not have happened on that site as part of the explosion. It was handed back over to Wirral Council on 6 April. Although there was some delay in the council gaining control of the site, there was ample time and it was well within the Bellwin scheme qualifying period. It may have been apparent to the local authority at the time that it would not be successful in putting forward a claim, but it is simply not correct to say that it did not get control of the site within the claim period. I understand that Wirral Council has agreed to set aside funding for individual residents and business owners who have suffered considerable financial hardship in the period following the explosion, and I welcome that.

I shall now turn to what help the Government can, and I hope will, provide to the residents of New Ferry. I understand that a bid of some £5 million has been made to the Mayor of Liverpool City Region’s town centre fund. That is, of course, Government money that is part of the gain share that gets paid to the city. I hope that Steve Rotheram, former Member of this House and Mayor of Liverpool City Region, will look with favour upon the application along the lines of the plan that has jointly been worked up with the Homes and Communities Agency.

Alison McGovern: The Minister describes the city region funding as “Government money”. In some sense, we can describe anything that comes from the Treasury as Government money, but if New Ferry is not helped directly by the Government, that city region development money that was there for the purposes of rebalancing our economy is effectively doing the work that the Government should be doing in this shocking and terrible event. It is simply not acceptable to the people of New Ferry that they should have to bid to a fund that is there for general economic development.

Jake Berry: For a start, I am sure that the hon. Lady would agree that there is actually no such thing as Government money. It all belongs to all of us as taxpayers. I gently point out—I did so in my opening remarks, and I do not want to get in a war of words about this—that at the time of the explosion, Wirral Council had tens of millions of pounds in reserves, which were paid in by Wirral taxpayers over a period. In her speech, the hon. Lady, who has been in Parliament since 2010—we came in together—talked about the need for regeneration of this site under her predecessor’s term as the Member of Parliament. She talked about how in her entire time in Parliament—nine years in total—she has been campaigning for the redevelopment of this site. Although, as she points out, the explosion has taken something from being “important” to “urgent”—and that is absolutely correct—it is an area that would, I hope, have been the recipient of regeneration funds from the Liverpool city region in any event. However, I accept that this explosion has taken it from being important to urgent. I do not think that anyone could deny that.

More widely, there is the future high streets fund, which was announced at the last Budget. It is open for bids of exactly this type, looking at a wider high street and town regeneration plan. The plan is already in existence. The expression of interest for the future high streets fund has to be in by 22 March. The hon. Lady said, I think, “bid, bid and bid again”. With the future high streets fund, we have ensured that the expression of interest round is very light touch. I am aware of the bidding fatigue in local authorities—in fact, it affects my authority in Lancashire—so we have tried to ensure that the first round of bidding for the future high streets fund is at a very low bar to enable local authorities to access it without unnecessary expense. Working up that bid to the second phase—if areas are successful in that competitive fund—is revenue-funded, so the Government will pay for and support the bid, working it up with the local authority.

I gently mention to the hon. Lady that I hope that, using her influence, she may be able to persuade Wirral Council to bring New Ferry forward as its preferred bidder for the future high streets fund. As she rightly says, it has made significant progress with the Homes and Communities Agency, looking at wider regeneration. In that fund, there is the possibility of fast-track funding for areas that already have a plan to deliver for their area. The intention is that the capital element of the fund could be spent this year, so if New Ferry were successful, either by being fast-tracked or by getting into the second round, it would mean that support could be available from central Government this year as part of our desire to invest in our high streets up and down the country and see wider regeneration.

Finally I shall turn to the public support available from central Government. In addition to the Mayor’s fund and the future high streets fund, this week we announced the stronger towns fund, which involves a wider regeneration package that could encompass New Ferry, Port Sunlight and other areas and looks at how, on a town deal basis, areas could pull together a wider bid to Government. That is more long term and may not lend itself as well to this redevelopment, which, as the hon. Lady said, has gone from important to urgent, but it is available. In terms of Government support, however, the future high streets fund, which is a competitive fund, albeit with a light-touch bidding scenario, is probably the way to go.

Finally, I want to talk about the importance of devolution. The Liverpool city region, which I know well, having been born and brought up in the city of
Liverpool, is really changing the conversation around politics. The hon. Lady is an exemplar of that. She, quite rightly, is fighting like hell for her constituents. I have huge admiration for it. It is evident in the way she brings this debate back to the House of Commons and has meetings with the Secretary of State. It is clear that she will never ever give up, as she says.

I think that devolution is part of that and I am very pleased to be part of a Government who have taken real power, money and influence and returned it to the people of Merseyside. I hope that with the Mayor’s gain share fund and the opportunities for redevelopment it will also deliver for the people of New Ferry, who I know the hon. Lady will continue to work for.

*Question put and agreed to.*

5.25 pm

*House adjourned.*
Monday 25 February 2019

[Mrs Madeleine Moon in the Chair]

Relationships and Sex Education

4.30 pm

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House has considered e-petition 235053 relating to relationship and sex education.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon.

It is often said that the British have a funny relationship to sex; we certainly have a very strange relationship to sex education, sometimes. We live in a society where explicit imagery, pornography and material that devalues and degrades women is available at a few clicks of a mouse, yet there are still some who resist teaching our children the facts about not only their own bodies, but emotions, relationships and all the things they need to keep them safe while they are young and to enable them to form healthy relationships as they get older.

I wondered why that was, so before the debate I had a look at some of the material circulating about these proposals. I must say that some of it misinterprets what the Government are proposing and is designed, I think, to alarm parents. The petition itself is not specific. It refers to “certain sexual and relational concepts”—

I think that was designed to avoid the rules about material that is offensive to certain groups—and suggests that some of the material produced for children does “more harm than good”.

Let me say that there is absolutely no evidence for that whatever—zilch. In fact, the research that has been done, mostly in America, shows that young people who receive good relationships and sex education are less likely to form early sexual relationships, less likely to have an unwanted pregnancy, less likely to get pregnant early and less likely to get a sexually transmitted disease. For me, that is a whole series of wins.

However, we do not need to look far to find a great deal of propaganda directed at parents about this. I found on YouTube a programme called “The Makinations”, in which a presenter introduces a lady who he says is a teacher, and she presents a number of books that she says are available in schools. They then go on to object to those books. For instance, they object to one that I presume is intended to talk to young children about differences, which says that girls can have long or short hair; I am guilty of that. They also talk about gay people “posing”—their word, not mine—as parents, and about “state-sanctioned child abuse” and even “graphic cartoon porn”.

I found that chilling, but not for the reasons the authors intended. If stuff such as this is being directed at parents, I am not surprised that they become alarmed. Honestly, the fact is that it was vile and homophobic, but it was also not true. I speak in this debate not only as a parent, but as someone who used to be a teacher—in fact, two of us here, myself and my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), have taught sex education in school, although in my case it was some time ago. Schools do not use books about a penguin with two daddies—the first penguin in the zoo with two daddies—with all children. They use them when children ask questions, or with children who might have two parents of the same sex, just as they would use a book about a single-parent family with a child who came from a single-parent family.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The hon. Lady is making some excellent points. I remember my mum telling me how frustrating it was, as a single parent, when she went to the bookshop to find some books about single parents and there was only one book about a little boy with a single mum and about building a bed. One book—and I was born in 1983. We have come a long way, but does she not agree that inclusive education on sexuality and all kinds of families is vital?

Helen Jones: I do, and I will come to that later in my remarks. Those of us who are long in the tooth will remember the controversy over a book called “Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin” in the 1980s. That book was available to teachers to use as necessary; it was not used routinely in schools.

It is important to say what is and is not being proposed by the Government. The Children and Social Work Act 2017 requires all maintained primary schools to teach relationships education, and all maintained secondary schools to teach relationships and sex education. Importantly, it qualifies that with the words “age-appropriate”, because teachers know that we cannot teach children concepts that their mind cannot grapple with. They simply do not take it in. Learning how children’s brains develop is part of a teacher’s training. We would be wasting our time trying to teach them things they cannot possibly understand at a young age.

Following the 2017 Act, the Government put out a call for evidence on the teaching of RSE and personal, social, health and economic education, and then issued draft guidelines last year. I have not yet seen the final guidelines—well, I have seen them, but they are under an embargo until the Secretary of State has finished his statement to the House. I will come on to that in a minute.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend accept that under a whole load of international treaties, as our constituents rightly point out, parents have the primary responsibility for bringing up their children and they may have different views from those she is expressing? Does she think, and will the law provide, that parents still have the right to opt their children out of these classes—with the variation, I understand, that that now applies only up to three terms before they turn 16? Is that not the right compromise between these two issues?

Helen Jones: I will come to that later in my remarks, but of course my right hon. Friend is right that parents must play a major role in this. Most schools will want to work in co-operation with parents; we would be foolish to do anything else.
The Government issued draft guidelines for what should be taught in school, and it is important to look at how those draft guidelines work. In primary school, children should be taught about families, “people who care for me”, caring friendships and respectful relationships. They should be taught that there are different kinds of families and what to do if they feel unhappy or unsafe at home. That part is crucial because, although we hear much about stranger danger, let us remember that most children who are abused are abused within their own families. We must remember that. They need to learn about how to keep safe online and offline, and where to go for help.

I cannot honestly see a difficulty with that. Saying to young children that there are different kinds of families is only reinforcing what they know. They know from their own experience, from their own classes, that some children will have a mummy and daddy, some will only have a mummy or a daddy and some, increasingly, may have two parents of the same sex. That happens.

In secondary school, what is proposed is necessarily more complex. Children will be expected to learn about the importance of marriage and that it must be freely entered into, which is crucial given that some British young people are still experiencing forced marriage.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): This is a timely debate in a number of ways. I read somewhere today that the Secretary of State for Education implied that parents could actually opt out of this. Having said that, I know that my hon. Friend has looked at the guidelines. Do they take into consideration, for example, religious schools? Several parents from different strands of religions have written to me about this. Could my hon. Friend enlighten me?

Helen Jones: The guidelines do take that into consideration. I will come to that in a moment.

Young people in secondary schools also need to learn about consent, what constitutes a respectful relationship and what constitutes sexual violence and sexual harassment. They also need to learn why what they see online is often a distorted picture of healthy relationships, about grooming and sexual exploitation and, I understand, about female genital mutilation and why it is illegal. Again, that is crucial to keeping people safe.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The hon. Lady is making a really strong case. Given that health workers and schools already receive FGM guidelines that say withdrawal from sex education is an indicator of risk, does she agree that it is actually incredibly dangerous if we allow the opt-out to be used in this blanket fashion, because it could mean that vital information is not passed on?

Helen Jones: All of this is about trying to reach a sensible compromise.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Helen Jones: I want to make a little progress.

One thing to note is that primary schools are not obliged to teach sex education, but it is recommended that they take steps to prepare children for puberty. As puberty happens much earlier in children now, that seems sensible. Crucially, on the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham), the guidelines say that schools must take into account the religious beliefs of their pupils when drawing up their programmes, and that faith schools may use their faith to inform their teaching. In fact, the guidance suggests that a dialogue should take place on issues regarded as contentious.

When I taught years ago, that is exactly what we did; it is not new in any way. I spent my teaching career in Catholic schools. We would teach—particularly our older children—what the Church taught and what others believed, and we would have a debate about it. There are good reasons for that. First, schools do not want to produce people who cannot put forward a rational argument, and faith schools certainly do not want to produce children who cannot defend their faith. Secondly, I have yet to find anyone who can stop a teenager arguing about any of this.

There are, of course, those who say that all this should be down to parents, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Worley (John Spellar) mentioned. Parents are clearly crucial in all this and should be partners with schools. However, let us be honest: some parents do not do it, and some increasingly find themselves all at sea in dealing with online risks, domestic violence, grooming and so on. I was struck, even years ago, by the amount of wrong information and misinformation that children have in their heads. That was before the internet.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): My hon. Friend is making an excellent presentation, as usual. Because of Ofsted’s powers and the way it deploys them, it is essential that we have total clarity about parental opt-outs and religious freedom. It is important in a debate such as this to understand that central to our unwritten constitution is the importance of religious freedom, as is the relationship between the state and parents. Because of those powers and their misuse in recent times by Ofsted, it is vital that the Government provide clarity. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Helen Jones: I do. As I said, all of this is about trying to reach a sensible and reasonable compromise between competing issues.

Seema Malhotra: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Helen Jones: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I must make a little progress, because lots of people want to speak.

Before the internet, children had enough wrong information in their heads. With the rise of the internet and stuff available at a few clicks, it is essential that we give children a proper education that protects them from some of the wrong information and ideas online, and that shows them what good, healthy relationships look like. Research from the Children’s Commissioners shows that many of our young people do not know what a healthy sexual relationship looks like and do not understand the concept of consent. That is very dangerous. It is why four Select Committee Chairs wrote to the
Government in 2016 asking for relationships and sex education to be made mandatory in schools; it is why the Women and Equalities Committee, in its inquiry into sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools, asked for the same thing; and it is why that request is supported by Members from across the House.

This is about applying a bit of common sense to this situation and looking at the world that our children are growing up in, which is not the same one that we grew up in. I say with great respect to parents who think that their children are not seeing all this online stuff that, although they may think that they are controlling what is on their children’s phones or iPads, they are not controlling what their children see with their friends or what is passed around in the playground and so on.

It is shocking that 28% of 11-year-olds have viewed pornography. Unless we want them to grow up thinking that what they see is normal and a proper relationship, we need to do something about it. By not doing anything, we are not leaving our children innocent. We are actually leaving them to the worst possible teacher: the internet.

Seema Malhotra: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Helen Jones: I really must make some progress. I am sorry.

Of course, many parents want schools to be involved in teaching RSE, as do many young people. Research done for Ofsted in 2013 showed that many secondary school pupils felt that too much of their education was on the mechanics of reproduction, and that there was not enough about emotions, relationships, dealing with pornography and so on.

Prior to the debate, the Petitions Committee met some young people in Parliament’s education centre. As one of them said to us, “If you’re opted out, you can just google it.” That is the problem we face; that is the reality of life. Nevertheless, it is true that parents have a right to request an opt-out from sex education for their child, which the guidelines say should be automatically granted in primary schools and should be granted except in exceptional circumstances in secondary schools. I was quite concerned about that, but I have actually been convinced by something sent to me by the Catholic Education Service, which supports the opt-out on the ground that it gives heads the opportunity to discuss with parents why the lessons are important and why it is much better for children to be there, rather than getting a garbled version from their friends in the playground. That approach clearly works, because the opt-out rate in Catholic schools is very low, at about 1 in 7,800 children. That is in a faith-based education system.

That opt-out applies to the sex education element, not to personal, social, health and economic education or relationships education, and not to stuff in the science curriculum, which is part of the national curriculum. It is also true, certainly in the draft guidelines and I presume the formal ones—that the Government suggest that children can opt back in three terms before they reach the age of 16. Case law no longer supports an automatic and continuing opt-out, so we need to reach a sensible balance on when young people can decide for themselves.

All parents face this problem, whether in deciding when children can go to the shops on their own or when their children are deciding on a career. It is hard. I remember the first time we allowed my son to walk up the road on his own to post a letter; we were hanging out of the bedroom window, keeping an eye on him for as long as possible. However, as parents, we have to realise that, while our job is to try to set our children on the right path, they will eventually make their own choices, which may not be the same ones that we would make.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Helen Jones: I will give way once more and then I will have to wind up.

Sir John Hayes: I am grateful to the hon. Lady; she has been very generous. Of course she is right to say that good parents take the view that she has just described about their children. Much the best way of growing up to be a well balanced, kind, caring and loving person is to have well balanced, kind and caring parents. It is in the home that people’s ideas are first shaped and formed, notwithstanding the influences to which they are subject later on. For that reason, parents and parental choice are critically important.

Helen Jones: Yes. As I have said, parents are vital to all of their child’s education, but particularly to relationships and sex education, and good schools want to work in partnership with parents. However, unless we allow our children to make choices, they will not develop the skills and the emotional resilience that they need in adult life, and I think that what the Government have suggested is a reasonable compromise.

So what is the problem? I think, from the correspondence that I have had, that it centres on the teaching of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues. Let us be honest, there is nothing new about this. Since 2010, schools have had a duty under the Equality Act of that year to deliver an inclusive and non-discriminatory curriculum, and many schools have gone further than that. I will refer again to a Catholic school, simply because that is the system I know. Cardinal Newman high school in Luton, for instance, has had all its teachers trained in LGBT and gender issues, so that they can tackle bullying and ensure that they give children the right guidance.

In the end, this is actually not about what someone called background indoctrination. We cannot indoctrinate someone to be gay any more than we can indoctrinate someone who is gay to be heterosexual, although practitioners of some very nasty conversion therapies have tried in the past. This is about respect for difference and recognising that we live in a pluralistic free society. If I demand respect for my faith, which is a minority faith in this country, I have to give the same respect to other people’s faith, but also to the choices that other people may make in life. This is about tackling bullying: 45% of LGBT people have been bullied at school. That has to end. Young people have to know that whoever they are, whatever their sexuality, they will be welcomed and cared for.

Most schools and, I think, most parents, whatever their background or religious affiliation, would have no problem whatever with that, but there has been a lot of misinformation going around, so I say to parents who are concerned, “First, talk to your child’s teachers.
Go in; don’t let other people tell you what they are doing. Go and have a look at the materials they are using. Go and talk to them about what they are trying to achieve. And you will see that there is very little to worry you there.”

I say to the Minister—this is not a phrase often heard from my lips—that I think the Government have got this right. There is the right to an opt-out in certain circumstances. There has to be a right for children to opt in at some stage, and I think that the Government have got the age for that about right—in other words, just before they leave school. I also say to parents, “Trust your children. If you have brought them up with the right values and the right perspectives on life, you have nothing to fear from this.” It really is about creating a society in which we can respect one another, respect our differences and work together. At a time when society seems to be becoming more and more polarised and people are shouting at one another on social media all the time, that is a sensible and reasonable thing to do and is good for all of us.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Order. Before I call John Howell, let me say that I have 14 Members on my list wanting to speak. If everyone behaves impeccably and takes no more than nine minutes, including interventions, we should be able to get everyone in. However, that does mean only those on my list making speeches and everyone being rigid when it comes to absolute tolerance of allowing colleagues to speak. I call John Howell.

4.55 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I shall try to be absolutely impeccable, Mrs Moon. It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. It is also a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), whom I seem to follow often in Westminster Hall debates. It is very appropriate that we should discuss this subject today when, as we can all see from the annunciators, the Secretary of State is still talking about relationships and sex education in the main Chamber.

There are two issues and I will treat them separately. The first is sex education, which is essentially about reproduction, and the second is relationships education. The issue of sex education raises two interesting points for me. The first is faith schools, and the second is the rights of parents. I am not one of those people who think that we should simply abolish all faith schools. Faith schools play a crucial role in our society and, at a time when we have gone a huge way to seeing what parents want—how they want their children to be taught—and allowing them to bring forward free schools, it is crucial that we acknowledge their rights to continue to have that with faith schools.

On the question of the rights of parents, I would like to start from the other end by saying that I do not think it is appropriate to put all the effort on to headteachers, who should have this decided by parents. I am sure that many of us remember the times when we had to have conversations with our own children about sex education, and however embarrassing they may have been—it was for me as a parent—it was for us to take them forward. I would like much more in the way of encouragement for the rights of parents. That is why I am enthusiastic about the right to opt out of sex education and to see that as part of the role of parents.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con) rose—

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab) rose—

John Howell: I will give way first to my right hon. Friend.

Mrs Miller: My hon. Friend talks compellingly about the rights of parents and of faith schools. Does he not also think that children have the right to know what a good, healthy relationship looks like in this day and age and how to keep safe? Do children not have that right as well?

John Howell: I partially agree with my right hon. Friend but am not sure I go all the way with it. Faith schools provide a lot of such education, or could provide a lot of it, if they were worked with and engaged with in a much more successful way.

Jess Phillips: The hon. Gentleman talked about how a parent could be there to give guidance and should be able to opt out if they wish to give the guidance. What would he say to a parent who is perpetrators of domestic abuse or even sexual violence at home, or to a child who is growing up in that type of environment? How will we ensure that, when those people opt out, the child can understand what a healthy relationship looks like?

John Howell: The hon. Lady makes an important point. One does not want to see that level of abuse continuing down the generations, but those issues can be picked up by other measures and dealt with in that way.

Seema Malhotra: Could the hon. Gentleman explain how he sees that happening? I will give him an anecdotal statistic from my constituency. I asked a headteacher of a primary school how many children in one class he thought might be subject to seeing domestic violence at home. His answer was five or six, which is pretty staggering. It shows a huge risk in the environments that many young children are growing up in.

John Howell: I am afraid that I do not know the answer to the hon. Lady’s question. I will not attempt one off the top of my head, but will think about it for a little bit.

I believe that we already take away so much from childhood. We should fight against the sexualisation of children—that applies to all children. I see a need to address some of these issues, but I do not see that the details of reproductive sex should be part of the compulsory situation.

There is a lot of good in the proposals for relationships education. I will give two examples, the first of which is mental health. I have always had a great interest in the mental health of children at schools in my constituency. One only has to look at incidents of children’s mental ill health to see that we do not want the child to continue to be distressed.
We live in a completely different age to that in which I was brought up. We live in an age in which there is a tremendous amount of social media—it is almost impossible to get away from it. That can produce the problems of pornography. There is a need to have some awareness, but that is an area in which the parents can be involved in a big way.

The second issue is online grooming. I come from a county that has had a major online-grooming scandal over the past few years. Seven individuals abused many girls—I have no idea how many, but the BBC claimed that hundreds of girls could have been abused in that way. I would like evidence to show what effect relationships education could have had in that situation. Could it have prevented that abuse from taking place or were parents in a better position to deal with it?

There are different types of relationships, of course. One cannot pretend that schools exist in a vacuum. One cannot pretend that we do not have lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender relationships. I have been very supportive of them. We have to acknowledge that that is the legal situation in the country. We need to talk about the fact that different forms of relationships exist and make that fact clear.

We are not asking for sacred religious texts to be rewritten or torn up. The role of Ofsted, which was mentioned earlier, is absolutely crucial in that respect. I urge the Government to instruct Ofsted to take a sensitive approach in recognising the nature of faith schools, and to work with the schools to deliver a better view of the way in which they deliver education. That means that schools need to be able to teach—what is allowable under the law without having to work with the Government to take them forward. Above all, it is important to remember that we are not asking them to tear up the Torah in order to take this forward. We are asking them to work with the Government to come to a proper solution.

5.5 pm

Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship in this debate, Mrs Moon. The turnout of hon. Members from across the House is testament to its importance.

It is a little disappointing that the debate clashes with the statement by the Secretary of State for Education. We will be making our speeches a little bit in the dark, as most of us have been here in Westminster Hall, rather than in the Chamber for that statement. Matters may have been improved on a little, depending on the content of the Secretary of State’s statement. I wonder if that Government statement was initiated by this debate and the e-petition, which many of our constituents signed.

I want to put into context my contribution and the perspective of my constituents. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) discussed the whole range of issues around sex education, relationships and sex education and relationships education. However, most of my constituents have been contacting me about the specifics of mandatory relationships education at primary school. None of my constituents is seeking particular or differential opt outs at secondary school level. It is all about the age appropriateness of conversations with young children in the context of religious backgrounds.

When these issues were first raised with me, I did what all hon. Members do: I turned to the law itself. What does the Children and Social Work Act 2017 say in respect of mandatory relationships education for primary school pupils? Section 34 gives the enabling power to the Secretary of State to lay down the regulations and guidance, which I believe is the subject of the statement in the House today. It says that religious background and age appropriateness must be taken into account. That is the legislative protection for faith communities, so that children who are being educated in any part of the education system outside the faith school system are protected and have their religious background taken into account.

Before any relationships education is delivered, according to the legislation, there must be a consultation. Failure to hold a consultation has led to a number of issues arising in my constituency and across Birmingham. It was not just a badly conducted consultation that did not involve all parents; there was no consultation whatever. That is in direct contravention of the spirit of the draft regulations and the draft guidance, and the absolute commitment in section 34 in relation to religious backgrounds.

Parents come to me in my advice surgery and say, “There is no consultation, Shabana. Who do we complain to?” It turns out that there is no process or no guidance for how to deal with those concerns. Those parents’ first question to me is, “What is the sanction when a school fails to carry out any consultation at all?” It appears to me that there is no sanction or mechanism. The regional schools commissioner does not have a role. I do not think that the Secretary of State has a role. Nobody seems to be able to say what the sanction is when the process fails.

If a school does carry out a consultation, the question is who decides what is appropriate and what is not. What happens when you have conflicting views between different sets of parents? That is particularly important in respect of religious backgrounds. As a member of a faith community myself, I can tell the House that we are not all the same. There are many differences of opinion between religious groups—between different groups of Muslims—on what is appropriate.

I welcome those from faith communities who are watching this debate from the Public Gallery. I hope they will not mind me noting that many are from the Orthodox Jewish community. There is an interpretation of religious texts within the Jewish community that leads people to what is described as an orthodox set of values and beliefs. There is also a self-described modern, progressive and reform end of the Jewish community, as there is in the Muslim and Christian communities—in all faith communities, in fact.

What happens when religious background is taken into account in a primary school setting in Birmingham and there are two groups of Muslim parents with full religious conviction, one of which says, “Actually, we think this is unacceptable,” and the other says, “No, this is perfectly acceptable.”? Who is the arbitrator when
their rights collide? There is nothing in the guidance and no consideration of the fact that it is perfectly possible for religious groups to come to different views about what is appropriate.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a brilliant speech. Does she accept that that is a particular problem in academy schools, because the accountability points upwards to the office of the Secretary of State? At least with a local education authority school, one can go to one’s local elected representatives to try to sort the mess out.

Shabana Mahmood: My right hon. Friend has been attempting to reconcile conflicting interest groups in his constituency, as he will discuss later. He is right that most cases in our constituencies have arisen in academy schools, for which there is nowhere to go other than the Secretary of State. If those schools were within the family of Birmingham local authority schools, we could at least come together in a joint process that respects and gives voice to religious backgrounds—not just moderate, reform or progressive religious communities, but orthodox ones. We could negotiate a settlement that does justice by all parties, allows all our valued, loved and respected communities to be included in that process and enables our children to have the confidence to move forward in modern 21st-century Britain. That is what all the parents who have come to see me in the last few weeks want and why they wanted me to be in the debate.

Mr Ivan Lewis: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Shabana Mahmood: No, because I wish to give other hon. Members time to make their speeches.

It has been a real problem for parents to get a fair hearing about genuinely held religious conviction in an atmosphere that sometimes does not feel tolerant of religious beliefs. Most of those parents absolutely sign up to the equalities agenda. Particularly in the Muslim community in Birmingham, Ladywood, we recognise that our status as a minority community demands that we stand up for the rights of other minority communities.

It has to be possible to reconcile the differing perspectives on life of different minority communities. I consider it a failure of politics that we find ourselves in entrenched, polarised and divisive debates, where the rights of people are set against one another. We in Parliament—the representatives of the people—have not done our collective job to reconcile those rights. Instead, we have left it to schools. In Birmingham in some instances, that has left us in a total mess, which is not acceptable.

Some of what has been done in Birmingham is not part of an early roll-out of relationships education for primary school pupils, but action under the Equality Act 2010, as my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North mentioned. The Equality Act sets out several protected characteristics. Nobody disagrees with the protection of those characteristics, but it is a fact of our modern politics—the culture war that we are all living through—that those protected characteristics conflict with one another in some cases. For example, there is no point talking about biological sex and gender identity with children, because the adults of our country cannot decide what the exact relationship between the two is. Those two protected characteristics are clearly in contested territory.

Who decides how we navigate that contested territory and draw a line that does justice by competing groups? It must be Parliament; it cannot simply be left to teachers or state officials acting in other capacities, such as in prisons or schools. There has to be a negotiated settlement led by the Government with input from every part of Parliament. There must be an acceptance that, in a diverse society, we must pitch at negotiated settlements between different groups in which most people can come to a compromise, because they are the greatest thing that we have to offer.

In the absence of anybody willing to play that role, I do not blame parents for saying that they want to opt their kids out, because the subject has become so divisive and polarising that they cannot see another way out. Without any arbitration mechanism or protection for those of us at the unfashionable end of the faith spectrum, in orthodox religious communities—I am an orthodox Muslim—whenever there is a conflict about rights, everybody feels it is okay to ride roughshod over orthodox communities and push them to one side.

I do not believe the Government have the right to legislate for the calling of an individual’s conscience. I ask the Minister to take that point away. Unless he can come up with a system that ensures fairness between competing rights, he must give way and allow a right to withdraw.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Before I call Fiona Bruce, I remind hon. Members that it is not appropriate to refer to visitors in the Gallery. In this debate, it is especially inappropriate, as people may not wish to be identified.

5.15 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I welcome the debate, not least because what unites all petitioners, and no doubt hon. Members, is the desire for young people to develop healthy relational foundations for adulthood. Given the modern challenges facing children offline and online, the case for updating the sex and relationships education guidance of 19 years ago is compelling.

Sadly, the World Family Map shows that Britain is a world leader in family breakdown, with record numbers of children experiencing parental break-up before they get their GCSE results. The debate should not be a call for no change—none of us can be complacent in the face of such challenges for children and families in our constituencies—but we need to be clear about what needs changing.

In many ways, the requirement is nothing new: to help young people understand the age-old ingredients of a long-term stable relationship in adulthood, and the importance of marriage and family. Let us give the Government credit where credit is due. The draft regulations spell out that pupils should learn about “the nature of marriage and” its “importance for family life and the bringing up of children”, which should not be controversial.

Last year, in a poll commissioned by the Centre for Social Justice, almost eight in 10 young people said that they wanted to get married and wanted relationship
education to help them to understand how to build long-term lasting relationships. That is what the Government’s relationships and sex education plans deliver, which is to be welcomed.

I have long argued, however, that the push for compulsory sex education in all schools is wrong for two key reasons: first, parents are the primary educators of children about sex and, secondly, the emphasis should be on relationships, which would put sex in the context of stable long-term relationships. I therefore encourage the switch to the name “relationships and sex education”—not to play with words, but to make relationships foundational. Relationships education should be integrated from primary school years through to relationships and sex education in secondary school years.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): In talking about the need to update the rules, does my hon. Friend agree that it is important to take into consideration the views of the orthodox Jewish faith, which we have heard about, and of the Muslim faith, such as the Sutton Central Masjid, which has lobbied me? As we heard from the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), we also need to make sure that young children can learn the actuality, rather than relying on the internet or their peers in the playground.

Fiona Bruce: My hon. Friend is right. Many organisations and schools have said that for years, including the Catholic Education Service, which has been a leading advocate of relationships-based education for some time, the Relationships Alliance and the Centre for Social Justice.

The gap in education is due not to a lack of sex education, but a lack of relationships-based education. Even for some primary school children, the problem is not a lack of knowledge about sex, but a lack of knowledge and understanding about respectful healthy relationships. I commend these proposals, which seek to address that, and the way in which the Secretary of State has engaged on the issue. For example, the issue of consent is a relational one before it becomes a sexual one. The addition of health education as a statutory requirement alongside RSE reflects the wider challenges affecting young people’s health and wellbeing, such as the impact of alcohol and drugs.

I am pleased that the Government listened to the cross-party call for action led by my former colleague, David Burrowes, who has done so much work on this issue, and acted when the Children and Social Work Act 2017 introduced compulsory relationships education in primary schools, and relationships and RSE in secondary schools.

However, the main focus of this debate is the right of parents to withdraw their children from sex education. We have to recognise that although the current right may be exercised only rarely, it is consistent with a fundamental principle enshrined in article 2, protocol 1 of the European convention on human rights: “the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions”.

The petitioners feel that parental authority is undermined by the lack of any parental right to withdraw a child from relationships education at primary and secondary school and by the proposed replacement of the parental right of withdrawal at secondary school with the “right of request” just in relation to sex education, with the final decision being made by the headteacher and not the parents. That may be said to happen only in “exceptional circumstances”, but those circumstances are not defined, and the very fact that the caveat exists is a breach of the current parental right to withdraw children. For many, that is a breach too far, and I agree with that assessment.

During the debate in Committee on the 2017 Act, Edward Timpson, the then Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families, said that “We have committed to retain a right to withdraw from sex education in RSE, because parents should have the right, if they wish, to teach sex education themselves in a way that is consistent with their values.”—[Official Report, 7 March 2017; Vol. 622, c. 705.]

I am clear that there is a distinction between relationships education and sex education, so I do not believe that a parental right of withdrawal is necessary for relationships education in primary schools. Parliament decided not to extend the right of withdrawal to relationships education and also resisted attempts by the Opposition to remove the right altogether—quite rightly, too.

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): I appreciate the case that the hon. Lady is making. It is important that young people learn about respectful relationships, and are equipped with the knowledge, resilience and confidence they need to challenge exploitative relationships.

However, a number of my constituents have been keen to stress the central role that parenting plays in children’s learning about sex and relationships. I must also stress the need to safeguard the rights of both religious and parental beliefs during the implementation of these regulations. Does the hon. Lady agree that, for that to happen, it is critical that the Government introduce these reforms in collaboration with parents and religious groups, by listening and responding to their concerns in more detail?

Fiona Bruce: I agree that consultation and deliberation are good, and I think the Government have done those things to a great degree. What I am saying is that I do not believe it is right that parents should not be able to withdraw their children from sex education in senior schools. I do not have a problem with children having relationships education, but there is a difference between that and sex education.

While I am sympathetic to the petitioners’ concerns about weakening the parental right to withdraw, I am saying just what I have expressed. The draft regulations propose that “the pupil must be so excused until the request is withdrawn, unless or to the extent that the head teacher considers that the pupil should not be so excused.”

The proposals put the final decision firmly in the hands of the headteacher, not the parents. Yes, the draft guidance states in paragraph 43 that “except in exceptional circumstances, the school should respect the parents’ request to withdraw the child, up to and until three terms before the child turns 16.”

However, no attempt is made to define what “exceptional circumstances” are and ultimately the guidance is just that—guidance. It is the regulations that define the law, and so they matter. They remove the right of withdrawal...
from parents and place it in the hands of the headteacher, who in effect will have total discretion to make the decision, with no requirement to explain it in any way.

What the Government state in the guidance actually affirms parents as the prime educators, as the guidance says:

“The role of parents in the development of their children’s understanding about relationships is vital. Parents are the first educators of their children. They have the most significant influence in enabling their children to grow and mature and to form healthy relationships.”

But the Government do not follow through on that affirmation when it comes to the detail on the right to withdraw. Headteachers are given a power of veto on parents’ rights, which is not consistent with the Government’s own guidance, legislation or the ECHR.

We have the requirement of the ECHR to respect “the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions.” We also have primary legislation in the Children and Social Work Act 2017, which states:

“The regulations must provide that...when relationships education or relationships and sex education is given...the education is appropriate having regard to the age and the religious background of the pupils.”

I will finish by saying that I do not believe that it is logical that a parent should have the right to withdraw a child aged 11, in year 6, given that there is, for example, a conditional right for an 11-year-old in year 7 to be withdrawn. I have not explained that very clearly, so I will just try again: I am not convinced about the Government’s legal and policy case for diluting a parent’s absolute right of withdrawal for an 11-year-old in year 6, compared with a conditional right for an 11-year-old in year 7.

5.25 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under you today, Mrs Moon.

I stand as somebody who is passionate about the importance of relationships and sex education for all children at all ages, because I am a child of the generation of section 28. I am a child who was at school in this country when the Government also tried to set rules about what we could and could not learn about what was a healthy relationship. And I remember seeing the damage that that did to children in my school and their sense of self-worth, and to the teachers, who felt frightened to answer the questions that the children had.

I am a child of that generation who, if we are right that we want children to opt out of relationships and sex education, is a living embodiment of the consequences of that, because we were a generation that did not have the internet. However, we had Jimmy Savile. We had predators in our communities. We had children living in families with domestic abuse.

I start today with a concern about the rights of the child in this context. We are all informed by our experience. My own experience is that, living through that kind of education—there was an absence of accurate, factual, child-based education—affected my generation.

For me, the case for RSE for all children at all ages, in an age-based and appropriate manner, is about safeguarding, because in the absence of those lessons it was not that we had a knowledge vacuum in my generation. I clearly remember the day that somebody brought a copy of “Lace”, by Shirley Conran, into school, and the lessons that book gave us. I am still unable to look at a goldfish in the same way that I did before then.

I say to every parent—every parent who is here today, all those parents who have written to me, and all those parents who have not written to me but who have been part of the work that we have been doing in Walthamstow about RSE—who cares about their children and want the best for them: “Thank you. Thank you for caring about your children.” It is the children who will not receive this education but who other children will still have to talk to in the playground, and still be in a classroom with, who I want to ensure are equally taught the right values and the right approach to other children.

For me, that is the question we face when we have an opt-out. What are the consequences for the children who have not had parents in their lives giving them good direction, and who instead have parents who cannot be in the playground with them when that copy of “Lace” is circulated, and who cannot monitor 24/7 what is found on the internet? Yes, it is also those parents who are not the best of parents, but we must make sure that their children are not let down by us.

I say that because I live in a community where we have just had the first successful prosecution for female genital mutilation, which involved a primary school-age child. We have to recognise that not every parent is as good as the parents who care enough to be concerned and who want to get this right.

We also have to recognise the parents who have been misled. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), who opened the debate, spoke so well about that. A woman came to my surgery this weekend to say to me, “I’ve had a leaflet about this. This is about teaching my little boy that he must be a little girl.” That is completely not what this process is about.

My generation did not have this education, yet there are certainly transgender people of my age and gay people of my age. If that proves anything, it is that this is not about sex and relationships education; it is about how that child is supported to cope with the world we are in today.

There is strong evidence of the benefits of relationships and sex education at all ages. It helps children to have the kind of healthy, productive childhood we all want for them. When we hear that 45% of teachers report homophobic bullying in primary schools, we know that what we are talking about is bullying, and if we care about the rights of children we must address that. There is also a rising incidence of peer-on-peer assaults—children attacking children. In that vacuum in which the alternative is the internet or the playground, I want a teacher to be the one to help ensure that children are given the best factual and accurate education. For too long, we have allowed this country to put composting as a requirement of our curriculum but not consent and, as a consequence, children have been left vulnerable.

I understand the process the Minister has gone through and, like me, he will have seen many good examples of faith-based sex and relationships education. I feel strongly about the importance of speaking up for faith-based communities who have engaged in the process and who are the best of their faith by wanting to get this right, as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood
(Shabana Mahmood) said. However, I also recognise the importance of its being the exception rather than the rule that children are opted out of something that can keep them safe, which is what relationships and sex education is about, at its heart.

I ask the Minister to consider monitoring both the numbers of children removed from lessons and how the consultations happen, and also to consider how we ensure that never again do we see a six or seven-year-old unable to describe their own body parts. If, God forbid, someone tried to touch them or someone in their own family did something to them, we would know that someone would have taught them how to say no and how to speak up. I say to the Minister, please let us not wait another 30 years for another generation of adults to appear who have been told that somehow being gay is wrong. Being gay is part of who they are. There are factual faith-based ways of having the conversations, and there are such great benefits to ensuring that every child has them. I say to the Minister: do not let them get educated in the playground or by the internet.

If the problems we now see as a result of the lack of support for my generation tell us anything, it is that in the 1980s we let a generation down. Let us put the rights of the child first, ensuring that parents are a key part of that but not missing the opportunity to get it right for every child, wherever and in whichever school they may be.

5.32 pm

Chris Green [Bolton West] (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon, and to contribute to this debate on the incredibly important right to remove children from relationships and sex education. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) made an incredibly powerful speech, capturing brilliantly so many of the feelings that my constituents and I have, and the concerns that many constituents have written to me about.

It is incredibly important that parents’ rights are respected. However, conversations I have had with headteachers since I was selected as an MP in 2015 have reinforced the concern that there is an imbalance of rights and responsibilities; and that there is a massive emphasis on the rights and responsibilities of schools, which undermines expectations of what parents ought to contribute. That manifests in a number of ways. I will not go on for any greater length than to say that if we give more and more rights and power to schools, and parents are unable to challenge schools’ decisions and the rights that they, or the state in one form or another, have accrued, the rights and authority of parents are undermined. A concern in civil society more broadly is that individual responsibility, whether that of school-children, their parents, or families as a whole, has been undermined, which then reduces people’s willingness to participate as full members of society.

The former Minister and former Member of Parliament for Crewe and Nantwich, Ed Timpson, said:

“We have committed to retain a right to withdraw from sex education in RSE, because parents should have the right, if they wish, to teach sex education themselves in a way that is consistent with their values.”—[Official Report, 7 March 2017; Vol. 622, c. 705.]

I believe that that is wholly right. It is a very good principle and approach. Religious schools have the right to teach RSE in accordance with their values and their guidance but children of the same religious or ethical perspective in a local authority school are not respected in the same way. It is incredibly important that that respect is universal and is not reserved for selective schools. It ought to be there for all schools.

Mohammad Yasin [Bedford] (Lab): The Government’s response to the petition clearly states that primary schools are not required to teach sex education but that, where they do, they must consult parents and include that in their policy. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that gives parents an automatic right to withdraw their kids from sex education in primary schools?

Chris Green: There is huge concern about what that consultation means and what impact it has. Can a school still make an overriding decision regardless of the contribution produced by a consultation? That is key to this debate.

The hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) rightly highlighted that there is, especially in Catholic schools, a very low number of children being withdrawn from classes—that one in 7,800 figure—but if trust and confidence broke down more widely, would we see an increase in that number? One of the aims in ensuring that that confidence is there is parents’ right of withdrawal, and taking that away would enable schools to make decisions with less influence and guidance from the wider school community. That is fundamentally important.

That leads to a concern about increased parent-sanctioned truancy. If parents felt unable to withdraw their child for just that lesson, they would perhaps withdraw them for the whole school day, which would undermine the child’s education more widely. The approach is not a respectful one. In so many other areas we hear about diversity and respect, and celebration of that diversity, and it is curious that in this area those things do not exist; rather, what the state or the agencies of the state believe to be right is imposed.

I urge the Minister to treat relationships and sex education as an integrated subject and to respect parents’ rights to remove their children, because that is the best way to ensure that more children engage with the classes. The classes make an important contribution not only to children but to parents, who are often informed and educated by their children. What assessment has the Minister made of the likelihood of an increase in children being home-schooled? A number of concerns are related to that.

5.39 pm

Naz Shah [Bradford West] (Lab): It is a pleasure and a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I concur with the comments made by the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) about the passionate speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) and the points that she raised.

I enter this debate as a representative of thousands of constituents who have been in contact with me, either directly or indirectly. Strong opinions—varying, contrasting opinions—have been expressed, all drawing equally on our tradition of respect for human rights. In grappling with the subject of this debate, I want to respect and have sensitivity for that divergence and be clear about the need to protect the vulnerable from harm while ensuring that the state fulfils its duty and individual
citizens are given their freedom. The connection between the collective and the individual has been discussed many times in this House. It is my firm belief that the empowered individual is the bedrock of a collective that upholds the rights of the vulnerable and protects them from those who are more powerful. Otherwise, minorities will be abused in the name of the freedom of the majority.

On occasions throughout history, coercive religious states have mandated that their worldview should be indoctrinated through all the structures of their societies, disregarding the rights of minorities or of anyone who wishes to pursue non-religious viewdows. It was in that context that philosophers, ideologues and revolutionaries from the Scottish coffee houses to the streets of Europe dedicated their words and their lives, sacrificing everything to build on the renaissance and give birth to modern liberal democracies such as the one we stand in today. Although liberal democracies such as ours often challenged authoritarian regimes that neglected minority rights, it took centuries for modern systems to include the rights and freedoms of working-class people, women, black and minority ethnic communities, and—more recently—people from LGBTQ communities. In all those regards, we have serious ground to make up if we are to have fairness and justice for all, but it is fair to say that we have come on leaps and bounds from where we once were.

When arguments are made in favour of mandatory relationships and sex education in schools to provide LGBTQ communities with further equality or protection from bullying, I can categorically understand and appreciate those arguments. When the argument is about protecting young children from sexual predators, or the dire need to protect our young children from the adverse effects of social media in particular, it is a no-brainer. We need to address all those issues in a way that is congruent with our need to respect the rights and freedoms of all components of our society.

Although there was clearly some debate about cultural and religious elements when the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 was passed, that Act did not apply to religious institutions: it merely aimed to provide everyone in our democracy with equal rights. The Act provided the right of marriage to those who were previously denied it; those with religious beliefs were unaffected by that change and were allowed to maintain their religious rights. We would not claim, nor should we claim, that by protecting the right to religious belief in that Act we were denying the rights of anyone else. This measure, however, is mandatory for everyone, without the right of exemption on the basis of belief. Many of my constituents, especially parents, have expressed concerns. They are not seeking a false right to be bigoted or to promote or incite bigotry, but they are concerned that the legislation engages with deeply personal matters that go beyond our purview as state legislators.

My call today is simple: the fundamental principle of a true liberal democracy is to ensure that a society can exist in which all people’s rights are intact. In that spirit, I ask that the concerns of my constituents, and many of the signatories of the petition that led to today’s debate, not be completely ignored. I have seen many of the draft guidelines published by the Government, and I welcome much of what is in them, as they signal a collaboration between parents and schools on the syllabuses that will be taught. Nevertheless, for many people, the guidelines are still built along unclear lines, and with the legislation not having been put into practice, parents across my constituency have significant concerns. Some of those parents have indicated that the legislation coerces them into giving up their parental rights, and that although they may not have a right to opt their children out of lessons taught in schools, they do have a right to take their children out of school and teach their principles through home schooling. I do not want that to happen, as it will be hugely detrimental to society as a whole.

Minorities and majorities change according to time and place, but we must stay true to our principles and not allow any minority to be ignored. I therefore call on the Minister to reach out to concerned parents, and I invite him to my constituency of Bradford West to consult further with parents there. Many organisations have suggested that the consultation period went silently by, and that not enough time was given for the parents to fully understand the issues involved. Those organisations also want to be part of further discussions to gain reassurance about many things, including clarity about how faith and cultural factors will be considered. It is in line with our fundamental principles that people should not be ignored, nor should they feel coerced. Let us win hearts and minds through debate and discussions. Even if getting this right means delaying the process, it would be a positive step forward. It is better that we win with freedom than lose with the perception of a denial of rights.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Moon, in this debate about parental opt-out rights. There is no disputing that it is a parent’s right to teach their child about sex and relationships, but at the same time schools have an important responsibility to teach RSE to all children, in collaboration and partnership with parents. Those two responsibilities are not mutually exclusive. I know from the expert lessons I have observed in Brighton that teaching RSE is a skilled job for which teachers need high-quality training. For that reason, the vast majority of parents work with schools, and are grateful for and support the provision of RSE lessons.

Having said that, it is vital that we do not forget that some children will not get RSE at home. We cannot guarantee that they will, and we do not know which ones will not. The very small number of children who are withdrawn from the classes may well be among those who would benefit the most. As Barnardo’s and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children have stated:

“To have a child opt out of sex education is tantamount to offering no sex education as it cannot be assured that the child will receive this information at home.”

There is also the serious question of how to ensure that children who may be at particular risk of harm or abuse are not withdrawn from sex education by a parent who is party to that risk. As I mentioned in an intervention, I have not yet heard a good answer to that concern. For example, guidelines for health workers and schools on female genital mutilation already include withdrawal from sex education as an indicator of risk.
Of course, only a tiny minority of parents withdraw their children from sex education, but at secondary level—the level at which RSE will become compulsory—I am deeply concerned that the Government have retained the right of parents to withdraw children until three terms before the child turns 16. Those who are withdrawn will, for example, miss out on vital lessons about sexual health at a time when sexually transmitted infections are rising among young people. Data from Public Health England reveal that a young person is diagnosed with either chlamydia or gonorrhoea every four minutes in England. In recent years, police and crime commissioners across the country have reported a dramatic escalation of child sexual exploitation, with sexting and sexual aggression by boyfriends considered normal and okay. Teaching RSE in schools on a compulsory basis is the only way to ensure that all children get the information they need to stay safe and to report abuse if they need to.

The petition that is before us says:

“We have grave concerns about the physical, psychological and spiritual implications of teaching children about certain sexual and relational concepts proposed in RSE and believe that they have no place within a mandatory school curriculum.”

I do not know whether any hon. Members in this House or in this Chamber today support the petition, but I am left wondering what exactly those “sexual and relational concepts” are. I wonder why they mean has not been spelled out. Given the kind of homophobic communications and leaflets I have received ahead of today’s debate, I am left with the strong impression that the message is one of intolerance and prejudice against LGBT+ children, families and teachers. Despite that, I remain confident that such views are not widely held and that the majority of parents want to work in close partnership with schools to provide the vital RSE that all children need.

Providing welcome clarity and calm ahead of today’s debate, last week the Ofsted chief inspector Amanda Spielman made it clear that all children must learn about same-sex couples, regardless of their religious background. She said that the lessons are “about making sure they know just enough to know that some people prefer not to get married to somebody of the opposite sex and that sometimes there are families that have two mummies or two daddies... It’s about making sure that children who do happen to realise that they themselves may not fit a conventional pattern know that they’re not bad or ill.”

As we move forward, it is important to keep talking with parents about what RSE teaches. It is not about promoting any particular lifestyle, which I think might be a misunderstanding at the core of the petition. At its heart, RSE is about giving children clear, honest, accurate and age-appropriate information. It is about reflecting real lives, keeping children safe and tackling bullying.

Mr Ivan Lewis: Will the hon. Lady join me in welcoming the Chief Rabbi’s clarity in saying that all Jewish schools, including orthodox schools, must make it clear that there is zero tolerance of any bullying or discrimination against LGBT+ students? That moral clarity from religious leaders, especially orthodox religious leaders, is incredibly important in sending the right messages to schools. The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech, but what weight does she give religious freedom in the context of this debate?

Caroline Lucas: I very much welcome the statement from the Chief Rabbi about stamping out bullying on any ground, including LGBT. That is an incredibly strong call, and it is very important. In terms of weighing religious freedoms with the rights of the child, I still do not see a contradiction. We are talking about keeping children safe and ensuring they have the confidence they need to be able to raise concerns. I do not see why there has to be a contradiction in terms of religious belief. I hope we can find a way through. I think there are a number of misconceptions about what RSE is about. Absolutely not about any kind of preferred lifestyle or indoctrination. At its best, hopefully, it is about a shared exploration with parents and teachers to keep our children safe.

Helen Jones: Perhaps it might help the hon. Lady if I gave an example. The Catholic Church does not support same-sex marriage. That does not prevent Catholic schools from teaching that same-sex marriage is allowable in this country; nor does it prevent them from teaching about gay rights.

Caroline Lucas: That teaching is allowable and legal, and the legal arrangement is as acceptable as any other in this country. That is an incredibly important clarification, and I am grateful to the hon. Lady for stating it.

As we know, bullying does exist. Huge evidence has been gathered by Stonewall that nearly half of lesbian, gay, bi and trans pupils are bullied for being LGBT at school. To quote Kieran, aged 18:

“I have been bullied since Year 2 for being gay. People called me names like ‘gay’ and ‘faggot’ before I even knew what they really meant.”

There have been recent reports that teachers in Birmingham have faced protests, threats and email abuse over relationships education. I was very sad to read that, and I very much hope that Ministers will use the power they have over the regulations and guidance to show calm and confident leadership. The Minister will know from what I have said so far that I do not support the opt-out, grateful though I am that we are finally moving forward with compulsory RSE. In my final words, I echo the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), who was calling for, at the very least, monitoring of what happens with the opt-out. I am deeply concerned that it could be those young people who need and could benefit the most from this kind of education who will not get it, and that is a cause of real concern.
Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I commend Members on an excellent debate. There have been some outstanding speeches, particularly that of my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), who opened the debate.

When we are seeing growing intolerance and even hatred across our country, the importance of good-quality relationships and sex education cannot be overstated. I came into politics because I want a fairer, more equal and just society, and good-quality education, including RSE, is vital to achieving that. We have already mentioned the importance of the Human Rights Act 1998 and the Equality Act 2010 in enshrining in law that, as human beings, we are all equal. We have the same rights and freedoms, whether we are female, male, non-binary or trans. Whatever our race or colour, whether we are disabled or non-disabled, whether we are of faith or none, however old we are, whatever our sexual orientation, our marital status or whether we are pregnant, our laws demand that we behave in line with them. However, they cannot dictate our attitudes, beliefs or values. That comes from formal and informal education.

The reality is that hate crime, including against Jews, Muslims, disabled people, gay people and other minorities, is on the rise. There is evidence from Stonewall that nearly half of LGBT pupils are bullied at school for being LGBT. That has a dreadful effect on their mental health, which includes one in eight attempting to take their own life. We have seen some horrendous videos of Muslim schoolgirls having their hijabs pulled off by baying mobs of their peers. I have been told about adults shouting abuse at Jewish children as they make their way to school.

The horror of child sexual exploitation and abuse has unfolded across all our communities. One in 20 children is sexually abused and one in three of those children did not tell an adult. It is vital that all children learn the difference between what is a healthy relationship and what is not. RSE has a key role in teaching our children and young people to treat each other with kindness, respect and integrity so that they can grow into happy, confident and caring adults. As a former public health professional, there is overwhelming evidence about the importance of providing high-quality, age-appropriate RSE in preventing sexually transmitted infections and unplanned teenage pregnancies. While I respect the views of those parents who believe they should be the ones who teach their children RSE, according to the PSHE Association more than nine out of 10 parents want schools to teach RSE, whether that is because they feel they do not have the necessary skills or knowledge or they are too embarrassed. We should not forget the 400,000 or so children in care, too.

RSE should be taught at school in partnership with children’s parents or guardians. RSE should be high-quality, age-appropriate and taught by well-trained staff following consultation and agreement between parents and schools. As has been so well enunciated today, where there is difficulty, we need a resolution process to ensure that we can agree something. Where we have not been clear as parliamentarians, we need a process to enable that clarity. Parents need to have confidence in what their children are being taught. That will also allow key messages to be reinforced at home and at school.

For those reasons, I do not believe an opt-out from RSE at school would be helpful. If that policy goes ahead, opt-outs should be the exception rather than the rule. My hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) made an excellent point about ensuring that we monitor the level of opt-out. I want to mention my gratitude to the faith leaders in Oldham who have been in touch and have shown great leadership. They share my concern about the intolerant tone and misleading information of some of the campaigns expressing a counter view. There is strong evidence to show that babies are not born hating people who may be different from themselves. They learn those attitudes, and sometimes those attitudes manifest into intolerant, hateful and even unlawful behaviour. Good-quality RSE at home and at school can help to prevent that.

[SI R DAVID AMESS IN THE CHAIR]

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you presiding in the Chair for this debate, Sir David. I am pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) after another one of her trademark thoughtful contributions. I thank Tower Hamlets Council, the Terrence Higgins Trust, Women’s Aid, the Sex Education Forum, Humanists UK, the National Secular Society, and Tower Hamlets police for providing briefings in support of today’s debate. I also thank Jenny Symmons in my office for making sense of it all and drafting this contribution, which I have managed to file down to comply with Mrs Moon’s suggestions on time limits.

Today I want to explain why I support compulsory relationships education and why it is not only useful but essential for the welfare of children in Poplar and Limehouse, despite 100 emails and 1,200-plus signatures from constituents supporting the petition. It is my stance that comprehensive relationships and sex education is a powerful tool for countering some of the biggest social problems—mainly misogyny, homophobia, and the resulting violence against women and the LGBT community. Society has a responsibility to ensure our young people have the confidence to live full lives without embarrassment, confusion or worse. As it stands now, parents have the right to withdraw their children from sex education up until three terms before they turn 16.

We know that some young people start having sex much younger than 16. They need to be educated properly about how to look after their bodies and avoid contracting diseases. My own borough of Tower Hamlets has one of the highest chlamydia rates in all of the UK, and the council is keen to address it through comprehensive sex education. The Sex Education Forum quotes research that states that young people who receive high quality RSE are more likely to start having sex at an older age and use protection when they do. Contrary to some parents’ fears that being taught RSE may encourage young people to engage in premature, unsafe sexual activity, research shows the opposite.

There is nothing to prohibit parents from giving their children further information. However, it must be covered in school to ensure that all children know the basics about puberty and adolescence. Consent is also an
important thing to learn at a young age. Young women and girls need to understand as early as possible how to express consent in an intimate relationship and to know that it is okay to say no. Young men and boys especially need to learn the importance of “no” and how to respect that. RSE lessons can also be opportunities to recognise any abuse that pupils might be experiencing. Lessons could help pupils to learn about healthy and safe relationships and recognise signs of sexual, physical or emotional abuse in themselves and others.

One in six children in Tower Hamlets have special educational needs, making them more vulnerable to abuse. Our council recognises the importance of RSE in supporting those children and young people, increasing their knowledge about sexual abuse and improving their skills in refusing activities with which they are not comfortable. Relationships education will also provide an important space for children and young people to learn about how to get on with each other and about gender dynamics. We know that sexist and misogynistic attitudes can be picked up in childhood, and if left uncorrected can develop into abuse towards women. Violence against women is a particular problem in my borough, much of it happening within the home. Tower Hamlets police told me that in the past 12 months there have been more than 3,400 offences relating to domestic abuse: 100 caused moderate or severe injury and four led to death. Four deaths caused by domestic abuse is four too many.

Tower Hamlets Council holds that a comprehensive education in gender equality and respect is essential to reducing violence against women, and it recommends working to counter it not only in schools, but in the wider community. I note that Women’s Aid welcomes the Government’s declaration, which is a sure sign the proposals for RSE are in the interests of women’s safety. Covering such topics is essential to help young women and girls recognise signs of abuse and unhealthy relationships.

This debate is also an important opportunity to emphasise how valuable RSE is in raising awareness of LGBT people and increasing understanding. In 2019 many of our families look different; children in our classes may be raised by grandparents, single parents, or same-sex parents. They may also grow to identify themselves as LGBT. Our children should not just learn about diversity in our society, but should celebrate it.

I want to commend the faith schools in my constituency that already provide RSE to a high standard, making sure it is inclusive as well as culturally sensitive. When it comes to sensitivity towards different communities, there are services available that can help schools deal with the challenges. In my constituency, Tower Hamlets Council offers their healthy lives team to advise schools on how to be in tune with the cultural attitudes of parents while ensuring that children and young people do not receive a lower quality of RSE.

Many of the organisations who briefed me expressed concerns at the proposed rights for parents to withdraw their children from RSE. For some young people, school might be the only place they can learn the facts and the law on issues around consent, sexual health, abuse and exploitation, and understand that attitudes in their homes or communities towards women may be unjust. The Government proposal states that headteachers will grant requests for parents to withdraw children up to three terms before 16, other than under “exceptional circumstances”. The parameters around exceptional circumstances need to be more clearly defined to give heads the leeway to deny requests from parents if they judge them to be against the best interests of the child.

Will the Minister comment on that?

It is worth keeping in mind that parents withdrawing their children and teenagers from classes will not ensure they learn about the issues only from their parents. It simply means their other sources of information will be the internet; representations of relationships from TV and films; ideas about body image from Instagram; and sexual education from online sources that are easily available. We need to make sure our children and young people receive the best quality information from reliable, trained professionals, and that it is ingrained in them before they are susceptible to dangerous messaging online.

In conclusion, I have made it clear today that I am fully in favour of all children and young people being taught RSE and am against increasing parental rights to withdraw their children from the lessons that will ensure the safety, mentally and physically, of the children in my constituency, and hopefully break cycles of violence against women and the LGBT community. With such vital education the next generation should grow up to be more tolerant and knowledgeable than previous generations.

6.6 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for leading this important debate today.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) and applaud the powerful contribution she made. She set out clearly and articulately very sensitive and difficult issues. Like her, I have a Muslim background, and the way in which she set out the issues is really worth applauding, and I am grateful to her. The only downside is that she made many of the points that I wanted to make in my speech. However, I am conscious that there are others yet to speak, so I will shorten my speech accordingly and not repeat too much of what my hon. Friend said.

Like my hon. Friend, in recent weeks I have been contacted by many of my constituents who have expressed concerns about the proposals, and I want to put their concerns on the record today. They are absolutely clear, as am I, that the need to teach our children respect for others and tolerance, as well as how to be safe, particularly in the modern era with all the safeguarding challenges that technology and social media now bring, must remain a key consideration. However, their concerns are understandable because, as has been mentioned by hon. Members from across the Chamber, the policy has been poorly communicated to parents and schools.

Despite running for several months, the consultation process was not made known to many parents, and even schools were unaware it was running. Only now, with the implementation of the policy rapidly approaching, have parents and schools been made aware of its existence. They are deeply upset that they did not have a chance to get involved in and contribute to the consultation.

As we have heard from today’s speakers, everybody agrees that this is a sensitive issue. Much better engagement with parents is warranted, and that needs to be handled...
carefully, with a proper, meaningful consultation, carried out in a well-informed manner. Sadly, that did not happen, and parents have concerns that they feel have been left unanswered.

Parents have also expressed concerns to me regarding the age-appropriateness of what will be taught in schools. They tell me that they are apprehensive that the content, which we do not know the details of, will not be suitable for primary school children.

Helen Jones rose—

Debbie Abrahams: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Imran Hussain: Not at the moment, because we are on the clock and I have a number of points that I want to get on the record. I may give way later.

Throughout the existing education system, the age-appropriateness of the curriculum is woven in alongside the maturity, understanding and preparedness of the children in question. To some degree, that question of preparedness and maturity is why primary school children do not sit GCSEs or A-levels. That is just one example; hon. Members have given a number of others that demonstrate that point. Age-appropriateness and preparedness must be central, yet right now there is no indication or absolute guarantee that content will be age-appropriate and suitable for primary school children.

Helen Jones: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Imran Hussain: I will not.

Parents are also concerned about the faith-appropriateness of the content that will be taught. Importantly, parents of all faith backgrounds are highlighting those concerns. It is not an issue for a single faith community, but one for the religious community as a collective. Again, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood made some pertinent points about certain sections of faith communities feeling polarised and perhaps isolated in some contexts. Let us be clear: faith is, and should be, a protected characteristic that must be respected and considered whenever policy changes are made in any walk of life, including education.

I cannot emphasise enough the value of the involvement and inclusion of parents in any education policy—another point that many Members have touched on. If children are to be successful in life and to do well at school, they need not only good schools, but involved parents. We cannot leave out parents or neglect them. Parents are the final custodians of their children, making decisions on their behalf until they can responsibly make their own. That is backed up by article 14 of the United Nations convention on the rights of the child, which states:

“Governments must respect the rights and responsibilities of parents to guide their child as they grow up.”

Ultimately, any education policy must have parental oversight and include parents, complementing the work that they do at home, with their involvement and consent. I urge the Minister, after hearing the concerns of parents in my constituency and in those of other hon. Members, to consider carefully all the concerns that I have raised on their behalf, and to ensure that the involvement and consent of parents in the education of children is upheld and maintained as vital and fundamental.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Initially, the regulations will not apply to Northern Ireland, although I suspect that eventually they will. However, even though they will not apply in my constituency, I nevertheless believe that there is a fundamental issue here that Members of Parliament, regardless of where they come from, need to address.

Many arguments have been made about the importance of relationships and sex education, and the benefits of it. One thing that strikes me is that the catalogue of increased domestic violence, sexually transmitted infections, domestic abuse and so on that we have faced has come against a background of increasing sex and relationships education in schools over the years. If anyone thinks that the regulations will be a panacea, we must disabuse them of that thought.

Helen Jones: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sammy Wilson: No, I will not take any interventions, because other people wish to speak.

The core issue is the freedom of individuals and families to make decisions about what the appropriate teaching for their youngsters is. There is an irony that, on the one hand, parents can withdraw their youngster from education totally and teach them at home, but when it comes to this one particular aspect of education the right to opt out is severely curtailed. That strikes me as very odd, especially for something so sensitive.

Many parents have written to me expressing concerns, and have expressed them in briefings that I have been given, that the state is taking away from them the responsibility that they believe ultimately rests with them. Parents may well decide that the relationships education that their children are receiving in school is appropriate; however, if they decide that it is not something that they want their youngster to be taught, the right to withdraw has been taken away from them.

It is also significant that most of the publicity surrounding this matter has been about lesbian, bisexual and gay relationships; when interviewed on Radio 4, the Ofsted chief inspector zoned in on that aspect. For some parents, those are not the kind of relationships that they want their children to be taught about by a stranger. If they are going to talk about those things, parents want the ability to teach their youngsters about that themselves. At least they would have control over what was taught in that instance.

Hannah Bardell: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sammy Wilson: No, I will not.

It is important that the state should not have a monopoly on such issues when it comes to the teaching of youngsters. I thought it significant that many Members who have talked about the importance of the regulations and expressed opposition to opt-outs are the very people who would, in many other instances, continually quote human rights obligations.

In a whole range of international rulings, including some by the European Court of Human Rights, and in international human rights law—I do not want to quote specific legislation or rulings—time and again the emphasis...
is that parents should ultimately have the right to know and decide what is taught to their youngsters, and should be able, where it is contrary to their beliefs, to exercise their right not to have their youngsters subjected to that kind of teaching. They should be the people who ultimately decide what values and beliefs are instilled in their children. It is significant that that aspect seems to have been missing from most of the speeches in this debate.

My final point is that the current rules either place a big burden on teachers or give far too many rights to headteachers. Nowhere are “exceptional circumstances” defined, so headteachers who particularly want their schools to push certain lifestyles in relationships education could refuse to allow parents to opt their children out. They may regard such parents as bigots, as people with funny views, as fundamentalists or as orthodox, which they do not like.

We have to remember that the secular trend in education can be quite aggressive at times: it gives headteachers who want to push an agenda a huge ability to say, “No, you cannot remove your children, whether you like it or not, because I want them to hear this.” On the other hand, the rules may place a burden on teachers and headteachers, because they will be left to make judgments without any specific guidelines or criteria. If headteachers are given no guidance, schools will inevitably make different decisions. I believe that that will put pressure on headteachers.

For all those reasons—individual freedom, the right for families to decide what they want their youngsters to be taught, and the ability for parents rather than teachers to make the final decision in the absence of clear guidelines—I believe that the only answer is to give parents the right to opt out in all circumstances wherever they decide, “This is not the kind of education that I want for my children.” I do not believe that children will be disadvantaged by that.

There are plenty of other, probably more effective ways for schools to deal with issues such as domestic violence or homophobic bullying. Having pastoral care, making sure that teachers know what is happening in the classroom and the playground—those are the ways to deal with it. I do not believe that the regulations will be a panacea or that they will deal with many of the issues that hon. Members have raised today. It would have had the two cabinet members responsible outside the school gates defusing the tension that has been allowed to grow and grow.

Parkfield is an outstanding school with outstanding school leaders, but we now confront a breakdown of trust between parents and the school leadership that has created unacceptable tensions. On the one hand, parents are very angry; on the other, teachers are feeling intimidated—and there was a graffiti attack on the school this morning. Both of those are absolutely unacceptable.

The tragedy is that school leaders and parents both want the same thing. Parents in my constituency are passionate about the Equality Act and are as determined to tackle homophobia as Islamophobia, but in this situation what they want is what I will fight for: the right for their voice to be heard, their role to be respected and their choice to be protected. We know that relationships education is vital to raising children in the realities of modern Britain and the modern world; it is helpful that that has been acknowledged by Members across the parties today. However, if we do not pay regard to those three basic rights of parents, we will fail in our duty as legislators.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) that it is deeply disappointing that the guidance was discussed on the Floor of the House today, yet we are debating it here in the Westminster Hall Chamber. The consultation was finished months ago; obviously, it is important that Ministers strive to get the guidance right, but we have been left in the unfortunate situation where we cannot debate its detail today, nor can the Minister reflect on this debate in perfecting the guidance for the years ahead.

I will touch briefly on the three rights of parents that need to be given sharp focus in the guidance, which obviously I have not had the chance to read. First, we need to ensure that parents’ right of choice is respected. Our experience in Parkfield relates to the teaching of the Equality Act, particularly the protected characteristics in it. Although that is a different piece of legislation from the Children and Social Work Act 2017, which enables the proposed regulations, it is difficult to unpick relationships education from education that relates to a protected characteristic. All parents ask is simply that the teaching of relationships education and protected characteristics education be absolutely balanced and give equal regard to each of the characteristics, including the background of faith.

As it happens, there are many ways of teaching the Equality Act. Birmingham City Council has one toolkit, Stonewall has another—I put on the record my thanks to Ruth Hunt, former chief executive of Stonewall, for her counsel over the past week—and there are also programmes such as “No Outsiders”, developed by the school. The challenge that we have is that parents were under the impression that “No Outsiders” was the only way in which the Act could be taught. That is simply not the case, but it has meant that parents’ right of choice over the delivery of education has not been delivered in the way that we should aspire to.

Secondly, we have to respect the right of parents to be the principal educators of their children with respect to relationships education. Decisions about the age-appropriateness of material have to be made in the
open, not behind closed doors. Where their relationships guidance is in collision with Equality Act education, I hope that the Secretary of State and the Minister will clarify what is what—and, crucially, which matters do and do not enjoy the right to withdrawal. At the moment, I am afraid, there is wholesale confusion among parents and among teachers.

Thirdly, we have to ensure that parents’ voices are heard all the way through the process. “No Outsiders” may well have been a path-breaking process, and there were lots of workshops when it was first undertaken, but those workshops were four years ago. Consultation must not be a one-off; it must be a constant golden thread running through the delivery of Equality Act education and relationships education.

In light of the new guidance published today, I am afraid that “No Outsiders” will have to be comprehensively overhauled and refreshed because of the substantial overlap between the two kinds of teaching. I hope that today the Minister will guarantee that the three basic rights of parents—the right to have their voice heard, the right to have their role respected and, crucially, their right of choice—will be protected as the school reworks its teaching over the months ahead.

My final point is the same as that made with such brilliance and eloquence by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood. I understand that the guidance will create particular guidelines for how relationships education is taught in primary schools. I understand that it will be down to the school to choose whether some kind of sexual component will be included in that teaching, but it is not clear whether there will be a right to withdraw from relationships education, because we were given to understand that there is no such right.

If a school chooses to take a particular path, what is the accountability mechanism for parents to disagree and bend the course of that decision? We simply cannot have a two-class system in which the parents of a pupil at a local education authority school can go to councillors and to the former chief executive of Stonewall in order to make their argument heard, whereas it is path-breaking for LEA schools, it will be a disaster for us. If the Minister will be able to steer LEA schools, it will be a disaster for us.

The truth is that although the accountability mechanism appears the parents of a pupil at an academy would have a two-class system in which the parents of a pupil at a local education authority school can go to councillors and to the former chief executive of Stonewall in order to make their argument heard, whereas it

We have had in my constituency. I hope that he will be able to continue to work with Parkfield at speed as it works through the new way its curriculum will need to be developed and delivered in the light of the guidance issued this afternoon. I hope that he will reflect on some fundamental points. The first is to clear up the overlap between Equalities Act education and relationships education—clear up what will and will not come with the right to withdrawal. Crucially, if rights to withdrawal are to be withdrawn, the Government need to set out more clearly the mechanisms by which parents can influence and change a decision taken by academies, which to many of us seem impervious to local opinion.

On Friday, I wrote to the leader of Birmingham City Council and to the former chief executive of Stonewall to suggest that we create a proper consultation mechanism locally, in which we can take the brilliant work that has been undertaken in the education equalities toolkit but also bring to the table the views of faith leaders and the expertise of organisations such as Stonewall. I hope that will allow us to create a process that gives parents confidence that their views on age appropriateness are being taken into account, that faith background is being respected, and that consultation is being undertaken. The truth is that although the accountability mechanism might well be able to steer LEA schools, it will be a prettier voluntarist approach for academies. That is a recipe for problems in the future.

I hope that all of this will have been taken into account in the guidance, with great clairvoyance by the Minister. If it has not, I urge him to bring that guidance back to the House and reflect seriously on the concerns we have heard from Members of all parties this afternoon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David, as I often do in this place. I thank the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for bringing the petition before the House and setting the scene—she took many interventions.

There has been a divergence of opinion among contributors so far, and I want to make it quite clear that my contribution will be along the lines of parental rights. I want to maintain that in my speech and am clear in what I am saying. In the past I have made my concerns known in the House about the proposals to limit the right of withdrawal from sex education. It is a shame that the Government have not listened to my views or to those of many esteemed colleagues, and that we have to debate this issue again.

This morning I spoke to the Secretary of State for Education, who I knew would be making a statement in the Chamber today. We talked about this matter at some length. To be honest, at the end of the discussion I gently and kindly said to him, “Minister, unfortunately you and I will have to agree to disagree.” We have a very clear difference of opinion on what the Government are trying to achieve and where they are going on parental rights.

Prior to the draft regulations and the guidance published in July 2018, I was quite hopeful that the Government would uphold the parental role and responsibility in relationships and sex education. When we discussed the Children and Social Work Bill on Report, the Minister’s approach seemed to be pretty balanced, and I thought we were moving in the right direction. Parents are of course the primary educators and guides of their children, which we should not forget. They play a central role both in helping their children to grow up into successful adults and in protecting them from harm—that is the responsibility of the parent. However, parents are telling us that they want schools to help them to deal with complex and fast-moving issues to ensure that their children grow up equipped with the knowledge and the skills they need to be safe and successful.
The Government have set their scene very clearly. However, the draft regulations and the guidance were sadly lacking in the help they have provided parents as the primary educators and guides of their children. Parental responsibility has been taken away, and the final decision of whether children at secondary school undertake sex education might soon be in the hands of headteachers rather than parents.

I asked for a legal opinion on what has been put forward. It seems to me that the regulations as published have not changed the parental right of withdrawal, which remains with the headteacher. The legal opinion that I have sought states:

“If any parent or any pupil in attendance at a maintained school requests that the pupil may be wholly or partly excused from sex education provided as part of statutory relationships and sex education, the pupil must be so excused until the request is with withdrawn, unless, or to the extent, that the head teacher considers that the pupil should not be so excused.”

It is clear that the headteacher takes over the role and does not allow the parent to provide the type of input into the process that I would like to see. During the passage of the Children and Social Work Act 2017, there was no indication from the Government that they were moving in this direction. There was no mention at all of headteachers assuming a responsibility that has always been with parents. It is one thing for parents to ask for help from schools, but quite another for them to ask for their authority to be supplanted—it is entirely different. Would those same parents who ask for help deem what the Government have proposed to be a help or an incursion and overreach? My guess is that it would be the latter.

Much of the debate comes down to an understanding of the boundary between the family and the state. Government seem to have decided that headteachers—not parents—now know best for children, which should not be the case. They seem simply not to trust parents, and it is a profoundly dangerous precedent to set. There is certainly an interesting comparison to be made with the right of parents to withdraw children from religious education and worship at school. Section 71 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 states:

“If the parent of a pupil at a community, foundation or voluntary school requests that the pupil may be wholly or partly excused—
(a) from receiving religious education given in the school in accordance with the school’s basic curriculum,
(b) from attendance at religious worship in the school, or
(c) both from receiving such education and from such attendance, the pupil shall be so excused until the request is withdrawn.”

The right of withdrawal from religious education and worship has remained uncontested since 1998. I imagine that if the Government were proposing to remove that right from parents, colleagues of different parties—both those with or without a religious background—would be rightly outraged, yet the Government have deemed it appropriate to undercut the authority and the responsibility of parents on relationships and sex education. RSE includes some of the most contentious topics taught in school, and it is a perfect example of where parents will want to exercise their rights, as outlined in article 2 of the first protocol of the European convention on human rights, which the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) spoke about. It states:

“In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching is in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions.”

That is what I believe the Government should be doing. These are issues of a personal nature—matters of morality, and it is best left for parents to decide how to raise their children. It is not for the state to decide the morality and standards of each family in the United Kingdom. It is for those families and parents to decide, and it should not be otherwise. Someone might not agree with how I bring up my children and I might not agree with how they bring up theirs, but fundamental to the values of a democratic society is our respect of the privacy of each other’s family life at home and our upholding of the freedom of conscience, thought and religion. That is what I believe and, although I suspect many hon. Members present believe that too, others may have a slightly different opinion.

I understand that it is right that we do not press our faith or religion on others. That is why parents have the right to withdraw their children from religious education—I understand, respect and accept that. I implore colleagues—particularly the Minister, whose responsibility it is to respond to our remarks—to understand that it is not right for headteachers or the state to press their values and morality on parents by not allowing them to withdraw their children from relationships and sex education.

Sadly, as colleagues have also noted, it is fairly impossible to understand how a right of withdrawal would actually work in practice, given the blurry line between relationships education and sex education. In reality, sex does not take place in a relationship vacuum, so we should not teach it in such a way—we must be careful about how it is taught. I understand that the Government’s draft guidance to schools addresses that point, which is another example of something that the Government have said that is correct. The end result, however, seems to leave a void.

It is nonsensical to stress that relationships and sex education should be taught in an integrated way, as one subject, and then to allow parents to withdraw their children from sex education. That will present overwhelming challenges to schools as they draw up their curriculum and to parents as they try to figure out when and how they can make the request for their child to be excused in the light of the interconnected nature of the subject. As I see it, the Government have an easy solution to those problems: put back into the regulations a right for parents to withdraw their children, and extend that right to both relationships education and sex education. That is a simple fix that is entirely in the Government’s power to implement, given that they have not yet laid the regulations before the House. That can easily be done now with a consultation process before the potential legislation.

As you were very clear on the time limits, Sir David, I will conclude my remarks. I ask the Minister to listen to my concerns and those of my esteemed colleagues and not to push forward with the radical change that will diminish and undermine parents and parental control. I implore him to uphold families and parental responsibility and authority.

6.42 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir David, and to have sat through the wide range of contributions to the debate—that is probably the only way I can describe them. Although
I appreciate that this is a contentious issue, it is not a difficult one. The petition is about potential rights, but at the heart of the issue are children’s rights and, unfortunately, some of the speakers have forgotten that.

As far as I am aware, I am the only member of the LGBT community to speak in the debate. I am a lesbian, and I started primary school in Scotland during the year that section 28 came into force. This year, my four-and-a-half-year-old niece will start school in Scotland, during the first year that inclusive education is introduced. That is a source of great pride for me. However, as the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) mentioned—unfortunately she is no longer in her place—the kind of bullying that I and some of my friends and colleagues experienced, and that is still experienced in schools, happens because of a fundamental lack of education, understanding and tolerance. I absolutely respect the rights of religious communities and of parents, but if they want an inclusive society—each religious group wants to be not just tolerated, but accepted—surely the best way to do that is for our children to be properly educated in their schools about the range of families, religions and people in our society.

The issue is of course devolved and I take on board the points made by a number of hon. Members about the implementation and the stress and concern that that has caused in some communities. That is regrettable. None of us is perfect—no Government or party—but from a Scottish perspective, the majority of parents in Scotland want schools to teach RSE: 92% in 2016 according to an independent poll for the PSHE Association. I want to highlight that Scottish perspective.

As has been said, nearly half of LGBT pupils—45%—are bullied for being LGBT. I am sure that some hon. Members will be aware of the work of Laura Bates, the founder of the Everyday Sexism Project, and writer of many an excellent column and book, most recently *Misogynation*, which I would suggest all hon. Members add to their reading lists. In her work, she recalls how young women described it as normal to be groped or sexually assaulted while wearing their school uniforms, and the shock that she experienced about the level of misconception and myth surrounding ideas about sexual relationships among young people.

A number of hon. Members have made the point about tracking the number of children in each school who are being taken out of RSE, and having discussions with their parents about how and what they are teaching their children is a sensible idea. I understand that some parents will have concerns about that, but surely a responsible parent with nothing to hide who has taken their child out of RSE should have no concerns about whether or not a school wants to support them in that decision. So many vulnerable children are being taken out of RSE. Are they not the ones who need that education and support? That goes to the heart of the matter.

Laura Bates also highlights the phenomenon of online harm, which I am conscious of as the SNP spokesperson on the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee. Although I only managed to catch part of the Secretary of State’s speech before I came to this debate, Laura Bates points out how drastically outdated the UK Government’s current guidelines are: it is 19 years since they were last updated. In Scotland, we updated ours in 2014 and they are about to be updated again. One in 25 primary-aged children are sent a naked image by an adult according to research by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

Educators have the responsibility to teach young people not only about sex and relationships, but about related issues, such as consent, conducting respectful relationships and the nature of unsafe relationships and abuse. I appreciate that in some quarters my view may not be popular, but it can only be damaging for a parent to take a child out of that vital education if they are not trained to an appropriate level and have the appropriate knowledge to prepare their child for what they will face. The hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), who spoke so powerfully in her speech, rightly said that although parents may be able to control what their children have on their phones or on the home computer—that is debateable and today there was a concerning article in *The Times* about the TikTok app, which asks children to strip—they have no control over what other children will show and put in front of their children.

It is only right and sensible, therefore, that any Government put the duty of care and safety of children first, and ensure that that education is holistic and informative. If children are not provided with that education, they will clearly be left exposed. As for the existing guidance for teaching relationships education or RSE, I think it is fair to say that repeal of a piece of legislation, or changing it, does not take away the problem. When we repealed section 28, we put nothing in its place. Children are still subjected to bullying, and not just to that.

LGBT young people, in particular in the trans community, have staggering rates of self-harm—80% or 90%. At the moment, a difficult and damaging debate is raging about trans rights. In reality—I think the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) made reference to this and gave her views—while the adults all argue about definitions and rights, children are much further ahead of them. When I talk to my local LGBT group, the Glitter Cannons, I find that some of those young people are much better informed than most of the adults I know. The reality is that these discussions and that education are taking place outside schools.

In Scotland, our LGBT education will be world leading. I pay tribute to the Time for Inclusive Education campaign, Stonewall, LGBT Youth Scotland and my colleagues in the Scottish Government, in particular John Swinney and Christina McKelvie, who were bold and brave and brought that policy forward. They consulted widely, although I know that people still have concerns, which we must work constructively on, as I hope and know the Minister will on the concerns expressed by Members about the legislation in England and Wales. In Scotland, however, our world-leading LGBT education policy will have no exemptions or opt-outs. It will embed LGBTI-inclusive education across the curriculum and subjects, which the Scottish Government believe to be a world first.

We talk about religious tolerance and freedom, but every religion has a spectrum. I am always minded to mention Vicky Beeching, who is a champion of inclusion and diversity in the Christian faith. She is a lesbian but also identifies as an evangelical Christian. When she came out a few years ago, before I came out, I had a
discussion with her at an event about her experience. She faced a huge backlash and huge persecution, but she pressed on. Vicky's book, “Undivided”, is absolutely worth the read—another one for Members to add to their reading list—and in it she talked about the reading and interpretation of the Bible and religious texts, and how certain communities can, for their own ends, interpret texts in a certain way. As we move on, as society progresses and evolves, people read those texts in different ways. I am not about to preach to any religion about how to look at its texts, but it is interesting that someone such as Vicky from the Christian community can talk from a scholarly and theological perspective about the Christian faith and how some in that faith have interpreted what the Bible says about LGBT people. It is vital to ensure that in our schools and societies, we recognise how society has moved on.

Pornography has become a huge issue, as many Members said, affecting young people’s sense of self and issues that they will come up against regarding consent. Not only in pornography but in advertising in general how our bodies are portrayed—how we should look, how women should look—is hugely damaging. If we do not teach our children how to interpret that and how to have meaningful, consensual and well-developed relationships, we are setting them up for spectacular failure. Some might argue that it is not for us legislators to interfere, but I absolutely take very seriously my responsibilities as an elected parliamentarian to ensure that children, wherever they are, are properly educated and prepared.

I am sure that the Minister will respond to the concerns expressed by some, and I take on board some concerns expressed by my own constituents, but I am also conscious of what the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) said: that there seems to be quite a lot of misinformation. The petition states: “We have grave concerns about...about certain sexual and relational concepts”, but it does not go into specifics. A lot of misinformation has seeped out into the public domain, and it is important that we counter it.

An incredible wealth of literature is out there to counter some of the narratives about sex, relationships and consent. I pay tribute to Lucy-Anne Holmes, the founder of the No More Page 3 campaign—it is a shame that the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion is no longer present, because she famously wore that T-shirt in the Chamber. Lucy-Anne Holmes did a huge amount for feminism, not only when she and her feminist colleagues managed to get rid of topless women on page 3, but in her work since then. She has just brought out a book, “Don’t Hold My Head Down”, which is a memoir about sex—another one for Members to add to their reading list. It talks about her journey into self-love and empowerment through sex, and about what healthy sex and relationships should and could look like.

When I read that book, it was almost like going on a journey through my own experiences. The reality is that so many of our young people are growing up in abusive relationships because they experience them at home or see them on television and in other media, and they do not understand what should be respectful and consensual. We must absolutely give them the best start in life by having inclusive education and doing everything we can to ensure that they are supported, can have fulfilling lives and, above all, are safe and protected.

6.55 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David, but especially in this critical debate. I thank all Members who have taken part: the hon. Members for Henley (John Howell), for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), for Bolton West (Chris Green), for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood), for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), for Bradford West (Naz Shah), for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), and my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne). Everyone made excellent speeches.

The Government are right to do being what they are doing. The common good is the maximum utility for the most number of people, but always with a preferential option for those who cannot go along with the decisions. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood whetted my appetite regarding the culture wars today, but we must be careful not to engage in them. Government should and have a right to govern and bring forward guidance on this matter.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), a woman with stunning oratory. She has absolutely brought due diligence to her work on the Petitions Committee and to introducing the debate today. She made powerful points that opened the debate up. I look forward to her soaring oratory when she winds up.

I just mentioned the common good; interestingly, the same concept exists in Judaism—tikkun olam—and in Islamic social thought, but we need to think about what that is. The hon. Member for East Antrim was right—I agreed with him—about one thing. As a school teacher myself, I used to rail against politicians in this place who thought that the answer to every social problem in our country was to get it on the school curriculum. It is not. Parents are the primary educators and we should remember that. The hon. Members for East Antrim and for Strangford might be on one side and the hon. Member for Livingston and my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse slightly on the other side, but I think there was a great degree of consensus in the debate.

A champion of RSE was my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), who got it included in the Children and Social Work Act 2017. Deciding what is in the national curriculum in social work Acts or amendments to them is not the proper way forward, or what I would want if I was in government, but she championed it, she won and here we are today. It is a shame that we did not have the guidance that would have informed this debate, and that the Secretary of State was on his feet in the main Chamber at the same time, but these are the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Proposals made by the Secretary of State at the time, the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening), included making elements of PHSE mandatory in all schools and making new subjects—relationships education and relationships and sex education—mandatory at primary and secondary level respectively.

In the past, RSE was seen as an add-on, taught for an hour every fortnight by someone whose job it was not, or by an outside agency brought in to tick a particular box.
That was backed up by the evidence of the Department for Education’s own data, which showed that time spent teaching PHSE fell 32% between 2011 and 2015. As a former PHSE co-ordinator I attribute some of that fall to my coming to Parliament.

High-quality relationships and sex education helps to create safe school communities where pupils can grow, learn and develop positive, healthy behaviour for life. Inadequate RSE leaves pupils vulnerable to abuse or exploitation, without an understanding of how to negotiate risky situations or where to go to for help. Statutory RSE needs to be part of the overall teacher training programme, and any qualified teachers whose role includes teaching it must be appropriately equipped and resourced. It needs to be done sensitively.

I taught year 5, including the sex education programme, for a number of years. There was a really well-developed policy through the Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education, local religious organisations and the local education authority. There was a sense of subsidiarity in how it was done in local areas. We lose that slightly through the multi-academy trust system, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill, pointed out. The policy was overseen by the headteacher, we held consultation meetings with all the parents of that class, we did one-to-ones, and we had an accelerated learning programme where objectives were clearly marked out and outcomes noted. It was done late into the term, when I had established good relationships with each child. It was overseen by a parent governor—Mrs Rocca in my case, who was also the school’s secretary—who would sit in on some of the lessons if the headteacher did not.

I would present myself at the school gates at the end of every day of those lessons, to ensure parents could interact with me. At the end of the lesson, when we had reached the objectives, the children could place a question into the pot and we would have an open, honest and constructive conversation about the questions they had. It was done really well at my school; I taught it well, but it was down to really strong leadership from the headteacher.

The Minister needs to outline what budget and resources his Department has identified to support schools, such as the school where I taught, so that teachers can deliver RSE effectively. The Government’s draft guidance clearly sets out the rights of parents and carers to withdraw pupils from sex education, but not relationships education. It also notes that the role of parents in the development of their children’s understanding of relationships is vital—they are the primary educators—and that all schools should work closely with parents when planning and delivering these subjects, to ensure all children and young people receive age-appropriate RSE. The Minister will probably touch upon whether it will be the same for LEA schools as for free schools and academies. We know there are differences in how the national curriculum is delivered.

For primary schools, the draft guidance states that headteachers will automatically grant a request to withdraw a pupil from any sex education that is not part of the school’s curriculum. For secondary schools, parents will still have a right to request to withdraw children from all sex education delivered as part of statutory RSE, and the request will be granted in all but exceptional circumstances. That will apply up until three terms before a child turns 16, at which point a child will be able to opt in to sex education if they so choose. The guidance is also clear that as primary educators, parents must be consulted on their school’s curriculum for relationships and relationships and sex education.

Children need to be taught what a coercive relationship is, whether violent or sexual. The Government have done remarkable work and I commend the Prime Minister—I rarely say that—on her work to combat human trafficking and the problems it creates. Children need to be taught what is appropriate and what is not when they meet people.

There is a danger that without a clearer steer from Government there will be big variations in what schools deem consultation with parents to be. That was the key message of the eloquent speech from my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill, about the issues at Parkfield. Will the Minister indicate what guidance and support will be available for primary schools to engage with parents on the RSE curriculum?

Views expressed through the consultation are helping to shape the final regulations and guidance, and the Department for Education expects to lay the regulations in spring 2019, alongside final draft guidance. We are expecting schools to be ready to deliver the statutory RSE curriculum in September, so there is not much time for consultation with parents and appropriate training and resources for teachers. Will the Minister outline the consideration he has given to the ability of schools to deliver within those timescales?

RSE is sensitive and can be emotive. Our priority has to be to keep our children healthy and safe. Like many in this Chamber, I believe that age-appropriate RSE should be a statutory subject in schools in order to teach children about mutual respect and the importance of healthy relationships. Its role does not end there. Greater Manchester Police are increasingly worried about child exploitation, but they are more worried about criminal child exploitation. Last year, just short of 10,000 children were off-rolled in years 9 and 10. The state had no idea where those children were. I have criticised the Minister about that, because it makes our young people hugely vulnerable.

Hannah Bardell: The hon. Gentleman makes a particularly pertinent point. The rise in the development of apps and threats to children online are so quick that many parents cannot keep up. Parents who take their children out of school will not have the information to give them the help and support they will need.

Mike Kane: I am sympathetic to that argument, but schools are increasingly off-rolling children and they are not being taught. The key vulnerability is in the home, but there are children outside who are not in school, which is a breeding ground for criminals who want to exploit children. I congratulate the hon. Lady on her powerful personal testimony.

Children must know their rights if they are to exercise them throughout their lives. Relationships and sex education is most effective when it sits as part of a whole-school approach embedded across the curriculum with well-trained staff, with an option for those with religious beliefs to have an input in that system. The Government must ensure schools have the resources to deliver that.
I hope hon. Members will acknowledge the very clear and carefully crafted guidance we are providing to teachers for these subjects, including how we determined the required content for relationships education in primary schools and for relationships and sex education in secondary schools. We have listened to the breadth of views that have been expressed and ensured that any developments, including on the right to withdraw, remain consistent with the guiding principles for these subjects, which Parliament endorsed during the passage of the Children and Social Work Act.

Our guiding principle, therefore, is that these subjects should help keep children safe, which includes knowing the law on relationships, sex and health. Of course, that includes age-appropriate teaching about relationships that primary-age pupils need to understand—about building caring friendships and dealing with the ups and downs of friendships, for example. We have set out how schools can acknowledge respectfully that some pupils sitting in their classrooms may have same-sex parents or, indeed, a different family model. That is why the guidance states that pupils should be taught that “others’ families, either in school or in the wider world, sometimes look different from their family, but that they should respect those differences and know that other children’s families are also characterised by love and care.”

We worked closely with a wide range of stakeholders to carefully craft the guidance in a way that is sensitive. The guidance states:

“In teaching Relationships Education and RSE, schools should ensure that the needs of all pupils are appropriately met, and teach them about the importance of equality and respect. Schools must ensure that they comply with the relevant provisions of the Equality Act 2010…under which sexual orientation and gender reassignment are amongst the protected characteristics.”

It continues:

“Schools should ensure that all of their teaching is…age appropriate in approach and content. At the point at which schools consider it appropriate to teach their pupils about LGBT, they should ensure that this content is fully integrated into their programmes of study for this area of the curriculum rather than delivered as a standalone unit or lesson. Schools are free to determine how they do this, and we expect all pupils to have been taught LGBT content at a timely point as part of this area of the curriculum.”

That guidance was carefully crafted to create a coalition of the widest support, and I have been pleased to see a range of stakeholders acknowledge that today.

Liam Byrne: I am listening to the Minister very carefully. What will be the mechanism for resolving disputes where parents disagree with the judgment a school has come to?

Nick Gibb: I will come to that in a moment.

The Church of England’s chief education officer, Rev. Nigel Genders, said:

“If adopted, these guidelines will equip schools and teachers to help children and young people gain the skills and knowledge to understand and value one another within a pluralistic society.”

We have had similar support from the Catholic Education Service.

All schools, whether religious or not, will be required to take the religious beliefs of their pupils into account when they decide to deliver certain content, to ensure that topics are appropriately handled. However, it is of course vital that, by the time they become adults and
participate in British society, pupils understand, respect and value all the protected characteristics in the Equality Act 2010. The Department trusts schools to make the right decisions about what and when they teach their pupils about topics, including equalities.

Mr Ivan Lewis: I thank the Minister for giving way. He is one of the Ministers that I think many of us in the Chamber massively respect due to the way he tries to do his job. I warmly welcome what he said about health education in our schools. We have had two tragedies involving young people in my constituency recently, and there is a growing awareness of how vital it is to teach mental wellbeing, particularly among young people, given the challenges they face.

However, who in the Government is responsible for assessing the cumulative impact on religious freedom of relationships and sex education, the regulation of private schools, and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government guidance on schools' integration duties? Religious freedom is cast aside all too often in circumstances where Ofsted takes a different view from that of a school. The guidance states that schools should be able to teach these things in a way that is consistent with their religious ethos, but who does a school consult when making decisions about what it is able to do in a way that is consistent with its religious ethos, without Ofsted intervening and making—in certain cases— inappropriate decisions?

Nick Gibb: The hon. Gentleman raises some very good points. We take these issues extremely seriously. We continually meet religious groups from right across the spectrum to discuss these very sensitive issues. He raised the issue of Ofsted. In common with other curriculum areas, Ofsted will not make a discrete judgment on the delivery of relationships education or RSE, but the proposed new Ofsted framework continues to set out the expectation that inspectors will consider the spiritual, moral and cultural development of pupils as well as a broad and balanced curriculum when informing the judgment of a school. We are of course in discussion with Ofsted the whole time to ensure that it enforces these rules in a sensitive way that reflects the religious background of the schools it inspects.

We have been clear that parents and carers are the primary teachers of these topics, and that these subjects are designed to complement and reinforce the role of parents by building on what children learn at home. That is why we have retained parents’ ability to request that their child be withdrawn from the sex education elements of RSE should they wish. I assure my hon. Friends the Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Bolton West (Chris Green) that the draft guidance preserves that parental right but also reflects the rights of a young person who is competent to make their own decision.

Fiona Bruce: I repeat that the guidelines indicate that, in exceptional circumstances, a headteacher may refuse such a request. I would be grateful if the Minister addressed that. The guidelines also state:

“Schools should ensure that parents know what will be taught and when”.

There is concern about how parents will be informed when relationships education becomes relationships and sex education, and the right of withdrawal becomes effective. How will that be monitored? Is that going to be left to Ofsted, or is there going to be more sensitive monitoring? In the light of the concerns that have been expressed, perhaps such monitoring would be appropriate.

Nick Gibb: I understand my hon. Friend’s point, which was also made passionately by the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I reiterate and refer all hon. Members, including my hon. Friend, to paragraph 47 of the guidance, which clearly says—and I acknowledge what she quoted—that “except in exceptional circumstances, the school should respect the parents’ request to withdraw the child.” That is clearly set out and schools have to have regard to those requirements.

Going further, the school has to set out its policy on its website—I will come to that in my comments—and it has to consult parents. There are sections in the guidance that clearly set out that schools should be consulting and working with parents when they are developing their policies for relationships and sex education, and when the right to withdraw will apply, so that parents are aware of what their child’s school will be teaching and when. When schools are introducing the curriculum they should be consulting parents.

I reflect the point made by the right hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) is right that the Minister responds very well to comments that are put forward. I remind the Minister that, in my contribution, I referred to the regulation that states:

“If the parent of any pupil in attendance at a maintained school in England requests that the pupil may be wholly or partly excused from sex education provided as part of statutory relationships and sex education, the pupil must be so excused until the request is withdrawn, unless or to the extent that the head teacher considers that the pupil should not be so excused.”

Despite what the Minister says, it seems to me that the end result is that headmaster or the principal can overrule the parent, which I think is wrong.

Nick Gibb: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s point. We have to take into account a range of views. Headteachers will want to respect the views of parents, but there may be exceptional circumstances. I do not want to iterate them in the debate, nor do we want to set them out, but there may be exceptional circumstances with a particular child when it is necessary to refuse the right the withdraw them. They will be very exceptional circumstances.

The previous position was that parents had the right to withdraw their child from sex education until the age of 18. That cut-off point for the right to withdraw is now untenable, as it is incompatible with developments in English case law and with the European convention on human rights. Therefore, we have sought to deliver a
sensible new position that suitably balances the rights of parents with the rights of young people. We believe that we have done that sensitively and effectively. Parents will be able to request that their child be withdrawn from sex education and that request should—unless there are exceptional circumstances—be granted, up until three terms before the child becomes 16, at which point the child can decide to opt in. If a child takes that decision, the school should ensure that they receive teaching in one of those three terms.

As with other aspects of the regulations and guidance, we have tested this position with expert organisations, including teaching unions, a wide range of faith groups and subject associations, including the Association of Muslim Schools, the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the United Synagogue, Parentkind, the National Police Chief’s Council, the NSPCC, Barnardo’s, Mumsnet, Mencap, the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse, the Council for Disabled Children and many others. They are listed in the response to the consultation.

We have seen huge support today for the incredible step we are taking with the new guidance and regulations. The guidance further stipulates the need for parental engagement during the development of the RSE policies. Good practice should include demonstrating to parents the type of age-appropriate resources that will be used in teaching. The regulations stipulate schools must have an up to date written statement of their policy, which must be published and available free of charge to anyone. We continue to be clear that parents should understand the content of all three subjects, and that schools should work to understand and allay parental concerns where possible. To respond to the point made by the right hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), we also heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) exactly how such education should be conducted in schools, in partnership between the school and parents. We heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) what happens when that process breaks down, although I would point out that at the moment schools are not working under the guidelines; it is a completely different set of circumstances.

We also heard from those with concerns about the policy. However, I wish that they would set out exactly what those concerns are, because I suspect—perhaps my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) would have been able to tell me if he had given way to me—that many of the concerns that parents have relate to what they have been told about what is happening, rather than what is happening itself. Schools are still undergoing the process of developing the curriculum and the materials that they will use. We also heard the views of the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), including his view that domestic violence has not subsided. I do not know how he can make that point, because domestic violence was not even considered a crime for many years.

All in all there is great support for what the Government are doing. We hope that they will provide the resources and support for teachers to implement it properly. I look forward to seeing more of our children being kept safe and able to form healthy, good relationships in the future.

Shabana Mahmood: Will the Minister give way?

Nick Gibb: I am sorry, but I will not as there is only five minutes to go. The hon. Lady referred to consultation with parents. The draft regulations and guidance outlining this content are the fruition of an extensive public engagement process and call for evidence that received over 23,000 submissions. That evidence was used to develop the draft regulations, statutory guidance and regulatory impact assessment, and was the subject of a public consultation that ran from July to November 2018. There were over 40,000 engagements, over 11,000 submissions and 29,000 signatures on two petitions.

Shabana Mahmood: I appreciate the Minister’s comments about how schools are expected to behave as a result of the new guidance, but he has still not addressed the material point about what happens when schools and parents disagree. What is the mechanism for resolving that dispute? What rights will parents have in that process? The process he outlined in relation to Parkfield was made up as he went along, and is not a process that parents can rely on as the guidance is rolled out.

Nick Gibb: Ultimately, decisions have to be taken about what the policy is for a school, but the school has to consult. If there are concerns that the school has not consulted properly, then there are a raft of complaints processes for academies and local authority schools that ultimately escalate to the school complaints unit in the Department for Education and the Secretary of State will take a decision, although that will usually be delegated to officials. There are processes for complaints—they will go through academies and the regional schools commissioner. The Department works closely with schools that are facing these challenging circumstances.

These subjects now present an incredible opportunity through updated regulations and guidance. The guidance on these issues had not been updated since 2000, since when we have had significant development in terms of the internet, and all the new risks and problems facing this generation of children. I trust that I have demonstrated the value that relationships education, as well as sex education and health education, offers children growing up in an increasingly complex and diverse world. Importantly, I hope that I have reassured that the position on the right to withdraw from sex education reflects our clear respect for the value and rights of parents.

7.27 pm

Helen Jones: It has been a very interesting debate, and I thank all those who contributed to it. We heard some powerful personal testimony from my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell). We also heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) exactly how such education should be conducted in schools, in partnership between the school and parents. We heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) what happens when that process breaks down, although I would point out that at the moment schools are not working under the guidelines; it is a completely different set of circumstances.

We also heard from those with concerns about the policy. However, I wish that they would set out exactly what those concerns are, because I suspect—perhaps my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) would have been able to tell me if he had given way to me—that many of the concerns that parents have relate to what they have been told about what is happening, rather than what is happening itself. Schools are still undergoing the process of developing the curriculum and the materials that they will use. We also heard the views of the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), including his view that domestic violence has not subsided. I do not know how he can make that point, because domestic violence was not even considered a crime for many years.

All in all there is great support for what the Government are doing. We hope that they will provide the resources and support for teachers to implement it properly. I look forward to seeing more of our children being kept safe and able to form healthy, good relationships in the future.

7.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Unhealthy Housing: Cost to the NHS

9.30 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move, That this House has considered the cost of unhealthy housing to the NHS.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank right hon. and hon. Members for attending the debate, particularly the Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day); the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn); and the Minister. I look forward to positive contributions from all those able to participate.

I am grateful to have been allocated the debate. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for healthy homes and buildings, I am delighted to have the opportunity to raise awareness and concerns about the cost of unhealthy homes to the NHS. I thank the background staff, who are in the Gallery, who have given information to us all, myself in particular, to help us in the debate.

Our APPG was created to shed light on the many problems caused to our nation’s health, wellbeing and economy as a result of people living and working in unhealthy homes and buildings. Given that most of us spend some 90% of our time indoors, it stands to reason that our homes need to contribute positively to our physical and mental health and wellbeing, not diminish it. This debate is so important because it pulls together those with a deep interest in homes and those with a deep interest in health issues. It is perhaps not a normal Westminster Hall debate, but it pushes very much to the fore the critical issues. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

Our APPG was created to shed light on the many problems caused to our nation’s health, wellbeing and economy as a result of people living and working in unhealthy homes and buildings. Given that most of us spend some 90% of our time indoors, it stands to reason that our homes need to contribute positively to our physical and mental health and wellbeing, not diminish it. This debate is so important because it pulls together those with a deep interest in homes and those with a deep interest in health issues. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

The APPG, following a weight of written and oral evidence received, launched a report, “Building our Future: Laying the Foundations for Healthy Homes and Buildings”, in October last year. It was a well addressed report, to which there were many contributions, and it brought together those with a deep interest in homes and those with a deep interest in health issues. It is good to have the report finished.

I have given the Minister a copy of the report, which contains a series of excellent recommendations that are helpful to the Government and will help us to move forward. I hope the debate will be a turning point, and that those recommendations will lay the foundations for change. The report sets out what needs to be done to ensure that new and existing homes do not cause or exacerbate health problems, because they often do. Many of us here, as elected representatives, will have people coming to us every week to complain about their home and, more often than not, the health problems related to that.

This debate is long overdue. It is time to raise awareness of the extent of the problem, and to recognise the human cost to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland of doing nothing. It is clear from the White Paper that unhealthy homes cost the economy and our society each and every year. Living in or occupying unhealthy homes directly and negatively impacts on human health. Unhealthy homes that lack daylight, or are cold, damp, poorly insulated, energy inefficient, overcrowded, noisy, badly designed and generate poor indoor air quality can, in the extreme, lead to unnecessary deaths.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman is an old friend of mine. I think he knows that those of us who campaign on carbon monoxide poisoning really welcomed his excellent report. I have lost three constituents to carbon monoxide poisoning, which is one symptom of an unhealthy home. I assure him that we will work closely with him to ensure that no more people die of carbon monoxide poisoning.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. My hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), who is sat to my left, also had constituents who passed away a few years ago due to carbon monoxide poisoning. That was in a holiday home, but it was none the less a problem. We in the APPG will take the comments of the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) on board, and we look forward to working with him.

Let me detail some of my concerns arising from the evidence that we heard. The effects of poor housing are estimated to cost the NHS £2.5 billion per annum; that rises when we consider all housing throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The true cost lies in human misery and lives lost. Some of the figures are quite extreme, but they underline the issue. Some 43,900 excess winter deaths occurred in England and Wales in the winter of 2014-15, with cold homes causing one fifth of those. That is more than the number of deaths caused by road accidents, alcohol or drug abuse, which puts into perspective the need to make sure that homes are healthy. Children in cold homes are more than two times more likely to suffer from a respiratory problem. Cold homes increase the incidence of cold and flu, and worsen conditions such as arthritis and rheumatism. Again, we see that every day in our constituencies.

One in four adolescents living in a cold home is at risk of multiple mental health problems, so we are not always talking about physical issues; there can be emotional and mental issues as well. Those in poor-quality homes that lack effective ventilation suffer from indoor air pollution, which has been linked to allergies, asthma, lung cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, cardiovascular disease and, more recently, dementia.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate and on championing this cause. I apologise. I will not be here for the whole debate. I am double-booked. There have been steps forward on this issue, such as the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018, which was recently taken through Parliament by my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck). However,
are conditions not getting worse for a lot of people? My experience is that there are two principal causes—the failure to build social housing, and the benefit cap—that force people into substandard accommodation in the private rented sector. Given the hon. Gentleman’s party’s special influence over the Government, could he persuade them to change those two egregious policies, which cause so much human misery?

Jim Shannon: If only we had that power! That is not to take away from the importance of the issue of social housing, which I will touch on later. Let us be honest: many people go into the housing that their pockets allow. As a result, they end up in housing that is not particularly in the right category, the right condition or the right shape. The hon. Gentleman is right that the benefit cap also dictates where someone can go. I will give the Minister plenty of time to get her thoughts together on that. However, that is an important point, and I will touch on it later.

Poor indoor air quality has an annual cost to the UK of more than 204,000 healthy life years. It causes thousands of deaths per year, and gives rise to health costs in the order of tens of millions of pounds. One third of people in the United Kingdom suffer from mould in their homes and are at increased risk of respiratory problems, infections, allergies and asthma. Just last week, I saw three constituents with mould growth issues in their houses—mould not caused by condensation, but ingrained in the walls. Sometimes ensuring that the housing associations or housing executive take those issues on board is quite a job.

There are more than half a million overcrowded households. The issue affects one in 10 children—something we cannot ignore. Overcrowding is linked to health and development issues, including meningitis, respiratory conditions, slow growth rates, accidents in the home, stress, anxiety, depression and poor adult health. Occupants of poor-quality housing are more likely to suffer from restricted daylight and noise pollution.

We cannot ignore noise pollution. In the news this morning someone put forward the idea of building houses and flats over railway lines. I am not sure if any hon. Member saw that. The first thing that came to my mind was the noise of the trains continually going underneath. How could those homes be adapted to mitigate that? We need to address noise pollution. Natural light helps to improve the recovery times of long-stay patients and reduces anxiety and the need for medication. Noise pollution can cause long-term health issues and increase stress and the risk of cardiovascular effects.

It is clear that there is a lack of public awareness of these problems, and limited knowledge of the facts. Too often, the homes we live in are, in so many ways, causing or aggravating health problems.

Mr Sheerman: Will you forgive me, Mr Robertson?

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): I would not want to miss anything that the hon. Gentleman said; that is the point.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Member for Huddersfield for intervening again. It is always good to have him adding his words of wisdom to any debate, at any time, in this Chamber or in the main Chamber. The issue is clear: too often, the homes that we live in are, in many ways, causing or aggravating health problems. That cannot be ignored. Given the plethora of health issues that I have identified as caused by unhealthy homes, and given the cost to the NHS, it is time to ask who in Government is responsible and accountable. We look to the Minister for answers.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): One issue that has been raised with me in Northern Ireland—I am sure that it affects the whole United Kingdom—is that when it comes to old and listed buildings, and particularly rows of listed houses, it is sometimes very difficult to get adaptations done, because they have to be done in a certain way.

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend highlights one of the kernels of the debate. Our white paper calls on the Government to take a holistic approach to future housing and ensuring that people’s health and wellbeing is placed at the heart of the built environment. That is clearly what my hon. Friend is saying, and that is where we are. Our white paper states that there must be effective leadership, and recommends that there be one Department responsible for healthy homes and buildings to ensure, critically, that homes and buildings maintain the highest standards for health and wellbeing; to identify where homes and building are causing health issues; to measure the economic and social benefits of healthier homes and buildings; to reduce health inequalities, of which there are many across the postcode of the United Kingdom; and to provide for a common definition and approach to policy, regulation and standards. That makes complete sense to me.

Furthermore, an interdepartmental Government committee involving all Departments and agencies responsible for health, housing and construction—including the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Education, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and Public Health England—should be formed to ensure that health and wellbeing is placed at the heart of existing and future housing provision.

If we are to build houses, let us build them right. Let us ensure that the issues to which the hon. Member for Huddersfield referred do not arise, whether the homes
are very expensive or of a lesser quality. I have serious concerns about the standards and quality of new housing inadvertently being driven downwards, without consideration of the cost to human health. In the context of the Government’s very healthy ambition to build 300,000 new homes and their healthy new towns initiative, standards must be driven upwards. It is essential that the Government adopt a holistic approach to delivery that addresses safety, space, energy efficiency, ventilation, heating, noise, air quality and lighting. We must all want to see quality new homes and communities being built with health and wellbeing in mind. I hope that the Government will agree that maximising the occupants’ health and wellbeing must be placed at the centre of new housing provision and building design.

Of course, we live in homes that have already been built, most of us in the privately owned or privately rented sector, to which the hon. Member for Huddersfield referred. Renovation of existing housing stock must also become a Government priority. This is not just about building new homes, but about ensuring that the homes that we already have are up to standard. Our white paper calls on the Government to develop plans to retrofit existing homes to maximise health and wellbeing and improve health performance.

Today, I have set out the problems caused by unhealthy homes and buildings. I now call on the Government to take on board the recommendations in the APPG for healthy homes and buildings white paper, which are as follows. There needs to be greater public awareness of the health problems exacerbated by unhealthy homes, and the health benefits to be gained through simple improvements and behavioural change. Importantly, how we live in the homes we build becomes part of where we are. In building new homes, priority must be given to ensuring that people’s health and wellbeing is foremost, specifically at the planning stage and through the national planning policy framework. Again, we look to the Minister for responses on these issues.

The Government need to commit to building greater numbers of quality social and affordable homes to help to alleviate issues of overcrowding and poor physical and mental health, which are all part of this. The Government need to optimise the health performance of new and existing homes, and ensure that they are built or retrofitted to “full health”. There must be greater focus on enforcement and quality control of home renovation standards, so there is a role for councils to play when it comes to checking the work that is done and ensuring that it is done to an acceptable standard.

The Government must commit to building the evidence base and promoting the link between housing and health and wellbeing. That would result in considerable savings to healthcare costs, increased educational attainment, improved productivity, and people leading longer, healthier and happier lives. The exact cost of unhealthy housing to the public purse, and the human cost, in terms of health and wellbeing, educational attainment and social care, is unfathomable. To date, Government attention to and policy thinking about this problem have been—I say this respectfully—woefully absent. We ask the Minister to address the issue in her response. We are looking for constructive comments. That is what I am about—indeed, what we are all about in the House—but we do need answers on what we are putting forward.

Ultimately, the recommendations made in the white paper provide the basis for a step change in policy, which will drive up standards and help to reduce the health problems caused by living and working in unhealthy homes and buildings. That is the purpose of this debate: to consider how we can do this together, and better, across the whole United Kingdom. The white paper is testament to the need to build better quality homes and buildings, as well as to upgrade existing housing stock, which comprises the vast majority of the homes that people live in today. We need to do something with new homes and set the standards, and then we will have to do something with the homes that we already have to bring them up to the standard necessary.

It is beyond doubt that there is a problem that needs urgent action. There is a lot to be gained by building and retrofitting homes to the highest quality and standard to achieve health and wellbeing. These are the pluses: lower costs to the NHS and a healthier population; better finances; better educational attainment and workplace productivity; reduced emissions—the hon. Member for Huddersfield referred to carbon monoxide—lower energy bills and a lower carbon footprint; improved health, wellbeing and comfort; and greater life chances and independent living and care.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate, and on the work that he continues to do on these issues. Does he agree that the subject that he is entering into—the need to renovate and upgrade housing stock—is particularly applicable in lower socioeconomic areas, in both Northern Ireland and, I am sure, across the UK? In those areas, health issues are even more prevalent than in the rest of society, so his point about the benefit to the NHS is even more applicable with regard to those socioeconomic groups.

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Those are the cases that we deal with in our constituency offices each and every day. Those issues are the subject of the site meetings that we have with the executives of housing associations, and of the meetings that take place with councils’ environmental health departments, back home and over here. There is a greater impact on those at a certain socioeconomic level, as the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) also said. Benefits also come into the process; there is the question of what people can afford to purchase and deal with.

I call on parliamentary colleagues from across the House to join me in taking forward the recommendations in the white paper, and call on the Government to join together and provide the necessary leadership and focus. We look to the Minister to do those things. The cost-benefit and rewards could be significant. The economic burden and sheer human misery created by poor homes and buildings, to which other hon. Members have referred, are simply too great to ignore.

I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for being here, and thank those Members who have come along to make a contribution. It is so important for us to deal with this issue. We look to the Minister for a significant and positive response—no pressure, but we do think it is important that we air these issues.
The recently published 10-year plan for the NHS is a welcome vision that sets out how the NHS needs to adapt over 10 years to meet current and changing demands, how we need to change the way we treat people and bring healthcare to people where they need it; and how to help people to manage their conditions. We are waiting for the Green Paper on social care, which we understand will come out in April. If we do not include one of the driving factors for why people end up in health and social care in the first place, however, that 10-year plan will be weakened or compromised.

That is why the debate is important, because now is the time to look across Government. If we want to deliver the NHS that we are all committed to and want to see in 10 years’ time—if not much before—and if we want to make social care work for everyone who needs it, we need to look at how we improve our homes and the health and wellbeing of everybody in the country who lives in a home that is not up to the job. I call on the Minister to look at the issue across Departments to see what we can do to deliver a more sustainable health and social care service partly by improving the homes we live in.

In the 21st century, in the fifth-richest country in the world, we should have healthy homes that we can be proud of. We cannot tolerate the situation for much longer. I will give an example of how that could be achieved, because just to say, “There is £2 billion. Go and sort your homes out,” will be a challenge. Money will be wasted and it will not be delivered in the way we would like or expect.

My suggestion, as it was when I first spoke on the issue, is to use Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly as a pilot. Cornwall Council and the Council of the Isles of Scilly are well placed because they know the problem, the homes that need fixing and the skilled workforce in the area. There is also a challenge in Cornwall to drive up skills, to give people the opportunities they need and to drive up wages, which it could help with.

The pilot would improve all the homes in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, which are the leakiest in the country. It would be a good way for the Government to see if such a scheme works and how it works, and how we could improve homes, create skilled jobs and improve attainment in children. It is well proven that children learn better and are healthier in warm homes; it is not just older people who suffer as a result of leaky homes and fuel poverty.

That work could also reduce the carbon footprint, which is important. Cornwall Council recently voted to consider how it could make Cornwall carbon free in the next 30 years and achieve a net zero emissions target. Reducing the leaky nature of our homes and improving the carbon footprint with well-insulated homes is a significant part of that. As I said, improving homes will also reduce the demand on health and social care services.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak. This urgent issue presents a real challenge and I would welcome the opportunity for Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly to demonstrate to the rest of the country how it can be tackled.
Housing is central to the wellbeing of individuals, families and entire communities. When people have decent, safe accommodation, which is suited to their needs, they have a strong foundation on which to build their lives and expand their life chances. That in turn has a stabilising effect on their families, local neighbourhoods and the wider community.

Poor housing has the opposite effect. It can have a detrimental impact on many aspects of personal and community life, and can significantly affect the mental and physical health and wellbeing of the occupiers. Every week, I hear about housing problems from constituents. Their properties are often in a state of disrepair—cold, damp and mouldy. Living in poor housing such as that can take a significant toll on the physical health of an entire household by increasing the risk of cardiovascular, respiratory, neurological and musculoskeletal conditions, as we have heard.

People with underlying health complaints are particularly vulnerable. Poor housing can act as a trigger that causes asthma symptoms to worsen, which results in hospitalisation, or exacerbates symptoms of arthritis and reduces the ability of sufferers to perform everyday tasks proficiently, thereby increasing the risk of falls and accidents.

Moreover, when an individual’s physical health deteriorates, their mental health is often affected. It stands to reason that if someone lives in a property that makes them physically ill, which fails to meet their family’s needs and which makes life more difficult on a daily basis, they are likely to feel depressed and anxious, and their self-worth is liable to plummet. When physical and mental health is affected in this way, because homes are unsuitable, that has an impact on someone’s wellbeing and their ability to participate in work, education, and social and other activities, and consequently impacts on public services such as social care and, of course, the NHS.

In Coventry, our local authority recognises the human costs for the individual of poor housing, as well as the economic costs for public services such as the NHS. That is why its new draft housing strategy places significant emphasis on improving the condition of the city’s existing housing stock.

The strategy prioritises integration of the housing and public health departments to deliver affordable warmth projects, tackle fuel poverty and improve residents’ overall health. It also aims to tackle rogue landlords who leave their tenants at risk as a result of poor maintenance, poor standards and poor management of homes, and it explores the option of introducing discretionary licensing schemes to improve standards.

Moreover, it seeks to maximise the existing housing stock in the city and bring empty homes back into viable use.

Those are just a few steps that the council is taking to tackle the city’s unhealthy homes, but it could do much more if it was given the necessary resources. With greater resources, the council could employ more enforcement officers, fund partnerships between advice agencies and GPs’ surgeries, and fund for the long term “safe and well” checks, which would be conducted by the fire service when vulnerable people were discharged from hospital.

Sadly, the Government remain committed to their vicious austerity policies, which prevent the council from making long-term strategic interventions. Without proper funding, I fear that, despite my council’s best efforts, housing conditions will continue to deteriorate, damaging the lives and life chances of families and individuals, with the NHS of course picking up the tab.

10.1 am

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair this morning, Mr Robertson.

I start by thanking the all-party parliamentary group for healthy homes and buildings for its report, which is excellent and so needed in the light of the serious housing situation in many of our constituencies. Consequently, I am delighted that the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), is here in Westminster Hall today. I had wondered whether a Health Minister would respond to this debate, but it is really important to get to the root of these problems. We hear that £2.5 billion is the cost of unhealthy housing, which I think is a very modest estimate. If we could shift that money into building and retrofitting homes into a better condition, what a better society we would have.

Of course, I look back to Michael Marmot and the report he produced when he looked at the social determinants of poor health and identified housing within them. The report by Dame Carol Black also emphasised the impact of poor housing. And, of course, we know from living experience the impact of poor housing on our constituents today.

So this is a timely debate and an important debate. We must look not only at physical health. We have heard about respiratory conditions; as a former physiotherapist who worked in that area, I certainly know the impact that poor housing had on my patients. However, we must also look at mental health, which is also incredibly important; I see that every week in my constituency.

We also know that there is the wider issue of affordability, and the stresses and strains that the failed housing market places on our constituents. In York, buying a property now costs ten times the average wage and therefore it is becoming completely inaccessible. People are having to up sticks and make a choice about their career or their living environment. Renting is also completely inaccessible in the private rented sector, and in the social rented sector the amount of stock has been reduced and therefore people’s options are also being reduced.

The quality of housing is also a massive issue. In York, 200 houses have a water course running under them—under the floorboards. As a result, there is damp, particularly at this time of year, which really impacts on the families in those houses. The council has a programme for those houses, but it is taking too long to move people out of their homes and make the changes that are required, which almost amounts to rebuilding the underneath of the property so that residents can move back in. So the quality of housing is a serious issue, including in York.

We have also heard about fuel poverty. I think we are all absolutely stunned into silence when we hear that 51,000 people in our country died prematurely last winter, with 46,000 of them being older people who were unable to afford to flick the switch and put their
heating on. Those are unnecessary deaths and it deeply concerns me that we have not redressed this issue; it is essential that the Government put a real focus on it.

I will talk about one or two cases in my constituency that have completely appalled me. I have already shared the information about some of them with the Minister, and they have to do with the behaviour and the conduct of my local authority.

People will remember that a few weeks ago it was bitterly cold, with freezing fog. An 18-year-old woman in my constituency had not complied with all the obligations placed on her as a young person in housing; her complying with them was challenging, both for her and for the authority. Therefore, the authority removed her right to be in housing provision. Putting a young woman on to the streets is one thing; to do so in freezing conditions, when the temperature is minus 6°C, is another. So we really have to consider what was behind that decision. Thankfully, my office jumped in and secured that young woman a placement elsewhere, in the light of our holding up a mirror to that situation.

We also have to think about our homelessness services. I have spoken in many debates in this place about what has happened with homelessness. Again, dealing with homelessness is about the joining-up of services; to make sure, first of all, that Housing First is in place. I know that if Labour were in the administration in York, we would end homelessness within a term of being in charge of the council, because we believe that housing is a human right. We are a human rights city and we believe that it is a human right for people to be able to access a home. We know that not being able to access a home has a serious impact on people, including on their physical health. We know that 41% of the homeless population have serious physical health conditions and 45% have serious mental health conditions. However, there is also the tie-in with substance misuse and other issues that have a serious impact.

The case that perhaps shocked me the most was that of a woman whose partner had moved out of their home, for certain reasons. Initially she was left in the property, but because of the change in the tenancy she was then forced out of her property. A relationship breakdown is stressful enough for somebody, but being told that they have to leave their property because a tenancy—an arrangement—has changed, and having to move into another property, was incredibly stressful for my constituent. She became seriously ill: she lost two stone in weight; she developed anxiety and depression; and she became extremely ill. In fact, she could hardly speak, because the stress on her was so great that she could hardly talk. Her mental health was in a very poor place, and yet the council pursued her and continued to move her from her property. She lost her business, she lost her work and she ended up on benefits, and was finally forced to move over the Christmas period.

That kind of behaviour by our local authority is contemptible, and I say to the Minister today that we must have mechanisms by which we can put the impact of housing policy and housing policy decisions, not only on people's physical health but on their mental health too, at the heart of decision making, because that situation with my constituent should never have arisen. As soon as she started becoming ill, the council should have started to pull back, but it did not.

I have seen that with another tragic case in my constituency. A young man has support needs. He had been living with his parents, but sadly one of his parents died and then the other. However, the Government policy about successor rights for property meant that this young man, whose home was his place of safety, was turfed out of his home and then placed in hostel accommodation. In that accommodation he lost his security, his surroundings and the neighbours who had kept an eye on him, and he ended up walking the streets during the day. He found that incredibly difficult. He was dealing with the double trauma of losing his parents and then his home. We need to put compassion back into housing policy, because not doing so makes people ill.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for her significant contribution. She has reminded me that in my office we have had three cases of homeless people over the past month, and the last one she referred to is very much in my mind. We seem to have people who slip under the microscope, with complex issues regarding health and losing their homes, contacts and friends. As the hon. Lady said, we need a better way of dealing with those issues. One way to ensure that those people do not fall under the radar would be to mark up any early-recognised physical or mental issues as a priority for the officer.

Rachael Maskell: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. A home is not just a physical structure of bricks and mortar; it is a whole environment in which someone lives and probably spends most of their time, whether asleep or awake. It is a security, a setting, and a place where the family is based, and it affects someone's wellbeing.

We must take a more humane approach to housing, and York, as a human rights city, is determined to see that. Housing is a major issue in the city; we have a massive supply problem. Every time the Government say they are building more homes, I say, “But not in York”. Our council has completely failed on that front, and it now looks like the local plan, which has been prevaricated over, is in real danger of falling because sites are pulling away. We have overcrowding because we do not have the housing supply we need, which means we have families who have been living on sofas for months on end. I received a letter just this last week about a gentleman who is not well and has been sleeping on the sofa for three months. The council has not intervened in that kind of case. It is right that we get a local plan to build the housing the city needs to address future accommodation needs—not all those luxury apartments we see going up everywhere.

My final point concerns my role as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for ageing and older people, and the provision we are making for our older people, ensuring that we have the right environments for them to live in. Increasingly, older people live in the private rental sector, which provides insecurity in later life. Others in the sector also face that insecurity, but it is compounded in the later stages of life. It is really important to build secure housing for older people.

We know that isolation and loneliness have a massive impact on wellbeing, but it is also about the place and environment in which people live. I would like to look at some of the impressive projects in the Netherlands, building villages that are safe environments for older people. In Hogeweyk, a dementia village,
people have their independence, which keeps them on their feet, which then keeps them healthy, and they can move safely around a village environment while at the same time having a few people keeping an eye on them. Three or four people, at various stages of dementia, live in each house. There is a shop and a hairdressers on the complex, and other places that people can go, but it is a closed environment that keeps people safe. There are some good models out there of how we can build proper homes for life and ensure that people do not have the stress—we all know that moving home is stressful—of having to move at a fragile point in their life.

There is so much more we can do with this agenda if a real aspiration is there to change how we look at the complex dual issue of health and housing. Should Labour come into power in York in May, our plans are to build transformation, ensuring both that we have private rental sector licensing to drive up standards, and that we build the homes that people need in a healthy environment, place making as we go, so that everyone can enjoy the place where they live.

10.15 am

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What a pleasure it is to serve under the firm but fair chairmanship of your good self, Mr Robertson.

I will not be very political in my speech; I might make a couple of swipes at the Conservative Government about one little item that worries me. In 1963, the enlightened Conservative Government asked Sir Parker Morris to look at homes for then and for the future. He came up with a very good report that was accepted as guidance by that Government, but it was not until 1967 that a Labour Government made that guidance statutory in the Parker Morris standards for housing and homes. Those standards guided us well and provided a framework for the quality of our housing. People had to build according to those good standards—cavity wall insulation, the size of the living room, the size and accessibility of the toilet, and all the stuff we took for granted.

Unfortunately, in the 1980s another Conservative Administration abolished the Parker Morris standards. That was an age when a woman I knew very well—Margaret Thatcher—believed passionately in the private sector leading and delivering more effectively than the public sector. At that stage, when that was fashionable—I am not blaming anyone who is around today—the standards were abolished and we have suffered from that for many years.

I chair both the all-party parliamentary carbon monoxide group and Policy Connect. We have taken a strong interest in carbon monoxide, and it hits home hardest when one of your constituents is affected, especially if they die. A little 10-year-old boy, Dominic Rodgers, was found dead from carbon monoxide poisoning by his mother when she went to wake him for school, in a little terraced house in the middle of Huddersfield. The poisoning was not from that home but from a faulty boiler in the house next door. The silent killer had seeped, as it does, across the passageway and killed the boiler in the house next door. The silent killer had also killed the boiler in the house next door. The silent killer had also killed the boiler in the house next door. The silent killer had also killed the boiler in the house next door. The silent killer had also killed the boiler in the house next door. The silent killer had also killed the boiler in the house next door.

There are some good models out there of how we can build proper homes for life and ensure that people do not have the stress—we all know that moving home is stressful—of having to move at a fragile point in their life.

As I said in my intervention on my very good friend, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—what a good debate he has initiated—the fact of the matter is that there are two worrying sectors. Huddersfield is the average, classic British town on all the criteria; what happens in Huddersfield is a symbol of what is happening in the greater United Kingdom. We have two problems in the town, one of which is old social housing. Over the years, that housing has been progressively upgraded and renewed. The situation has not been helped by some of the poor effects and unintended consequences of right to buy, but social housing has a much better record than private rented accommodation regarding healthy homes and intervention to ensure that people live in a healthy, safe environment.

The real problem, in Huddersfield and elsewhere, is private rented accommodation. It is a sad fact that the standard of private accommodation is very variable. Until recently, many of the students who came to university towns—certainly my four children—found themselves living in rented accommodation that was pretty awful. A parent would not want their children living in accommodation of that quality, and they were certainly not healthy environments: I am talking about accommodation in Cambridge, Bristol and Edinburgh. However, we have had a revolution in the private rented sector for students. At one stage, I teased the housing Minister, because in Huddersfield we had cranes, new blocks, and wonderful, posh, modern accommodation for students. I kept asking the various housing Ministers who came and went, “If we can do that for students, why can we not build those sorts of buildings—modern, high-quality accommodation—for elderly people in our constituencies and in our country?”

The fact of the matter is that private rented accommodation is difficult, and one aspect of that difficulty arises when we want to look at smart metering. We want to go into a house to fit smart meters, in order to bring down the cost of energy and the amount of money that people on low incomes spend on heating. Getting in for that purpose, or to check whether there is a carbon monoxide detector or a smoke alarm, is very difficult in private accommodation. A lot of people do not want us to know how many people are living in that accommodation; they want to be private, which makes it difficult. We know that a high percentage of gas appliances in those rented homes are very dangerous indeed. They have not been serviced every year, and they could very well kill the people living in that accommodation.

I do not want to concentrate just on carbon monoxide, so I will finish my remarks by saying that this morning, when I was getting up early in order to speak in this debate at 9.30, I was startled when I turned on the radio to listen to the “Today” programme and heard someone from the housing sector—I have to say, a rather complacent person—being interviewed. Mr Robertson, as a working politician like me, you probably shout at the radio sometimes, because you want John or one of the other interviewers to really push a particular question. This morning, I wanted that representative of the housing
sector to answer this question: “What happened to the Help to Buy programme?” We know that that money did not flow into Northern Irish homes and housing, and it did not flow into homes and housing in my constituency: it flowed into the coffers of the big housing companies. We thought that those tens of millions of pounds were going to regenerate the market and provide homes for people who needed them, but it all went wrong. It is another bit of public policy that started with brave intentions and went awry. Those tens of millions of pounds could have been spent on investing in healthy homes, improving them and bringing them up to what was the Parker Morris standard.

That is the most political thing that I will say today. I have found that, across the House and in this very Chamber, there is a lot of consensus that there is a problem, and that the problem can be solved. However, we have to start focusing our energy and, for goodness’ sake, both parties need to show some real leadership in providing what people in this country deserve—great standards for homes and housing. The 1960s were pretty good for music; I think the Beatles’ first album came out in 1963. Some very good regulation and legislation also came out in the 1960s. I beg the Minister to listen to a bit more Beatles music, and to have a spring awakening to the fact that she has the ability and capacity to lead on this issue, providing healthy homes for all the people in this country who deserve them.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): I remind the Front-Bench speakers that I would like to leave two minutes at the end of the debate for Mr Shannon to respond.

10.24 am

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson, in what has been an interesting, consensual and informative debate that I am grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for having secured. All too often, we describe debates as important when they are not, but this debate is genuinely important, and it is good to see consensus about that across the Chamber. I thank the hon. Gentleman not just for his thorough opening speech, but for his work in chairing the all-party parliamentary group for healthy homes and buildings, and for the excellent report that it recently produced.

There is no doubt that housing is the foundation that connects people to their communities, or that healthy homes help empower full participation in community life. As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, healthy homes lead to better educational attainment, higher workplace productivity, reduced emissions, lower energy bills and a lower carbon footprint—objectives that we would all unite in supporting. Poor housing, on the other hand, detrimentally contributes to physical and mental health inequalities through the effects of housing costs, housing quality, fuel poverty and the role of housing in community life, and many Members have provided examples and case studies that have helped to illustrate that point. Many people do not live in a home that is warm, dry and affordable, and those on the lowest incomes are most disproportionately affected. The hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) made some good points about housing and fuel poverty, an issue that affects my constituency, and one that we should be doing a lot more to tackle in this modern age.

Income, wealth and the welfare system are undeniably at the heart of the relationship between housing and health inequalities. Poverty-related inequalities represent thousands of premature deaths every year. In Scotland, both housing and health are devolved. I have some Scottish figures that give a wee bit of flavour; they are pretty similar to those we have heard from Members from elsewhere in the UK. Figures from NHS Scotland show that men in the most deprived areas spend nearly 25 fewer years in good health than those in the least deprived areas; for women, the figure is 22 years. Housing clearly has the potential to reduce or reinforce those inequalities. In Scotland, all homes are required to meet the tolerable standard of habitability. It is estimated that 1% of all homes fell below that standard in 2017—that is down from 4% in 2012, so we are going the right way. Perhaps more worrying is that, as Members have mentioned, the private sector is lagging behind; the public sector is leading the way. Private homes, which are a different matter, are in between.

There is a lot of work that we need to do in all areas of housing tenure, and there are several linked factors in that, such as the number of properties available in an area. The quality of the homes is also a major factor—as affordability, perhaps more importantly. In Scotland, the Scottish National party has delivered more than 76,500 affordable homes since 2007, and is investing more than £3 billion to deliver at least another 50,000 affordable homes during the current parliamentary Session. The Scottish Government continue to support the empty homes partnership, which has brought 3,200 empty homes back into use since 2010. There are empty homes all around our country that could be put to use in housing people. The Scottish Government have introduced the Fuel Poverty (Target, Definition and Strategy) (Scotland) Bill, which sets a target of no more than 5% of Scottish households being in fuel poverty by 2040. In my opinion, 5% is still too many, but if we can achieve that, it will be a step in the right direction.

Between 2007 and 2017, the average price of domestic fuel rose from £856 to £1,249 per annum—a rise of approximately 46%. That is a frightening figure over a decade: people’s wages certainly have not kept pace with that rise. Fuel poverty causes massive debt, and living in a cold, damp environment can exacerbate health problems such as asthma and heart conditions, as a number of Members have mentioned. It is unacceptable in this modern age that any household should have to choose between heating and eating, yet people who are struggling to pay their bills often ration their use of energy, perhaps heating just one room, having to choose between cooking or heating their home, or limiting the use of washing machines and heating water for baths or showers, all of which can have an impact on people’s health and wellbeing. There is a correlation between fuel poverty and increased winter mortality, or excess winter deaths. Increased winter mortality is associated with low indoor temperatures, and the excess winter mortality figure for 2017-18 in Scotland was 4,800, a figure not significantly different from the English figures mentioned earlier.

To become a fairer and more just society, it is crucial that we end the scourge of fuel poverty. As technology moves forward, we should do a lot more on the “Big Mother” scenario, rather than the Big Brother scenario. Smart meters and other technology are growing all the time. It would not be impossible to have feedback from
people’s homes on the temperature in their houses. Action could then be taken, particularly in areas where we know there are elderly people, or people with social conditions, who are suffering and check why they are not heating their home properly. Perhaps we should even think about the health sector being able to prescribe heat. It may save money in the long run.

The worst housing position for anyone to find themselves in is homelessness. The health of people experiencing homelessness is significantly worse than that of the general population. The Library briefing provided for the debate highlighted a Local Government Association report that identified that 41% of homeless people have a long-term physical health problem, and 45% have a diagnosed mental health problem, compared with respective figures of 28% and 25% in the general population. That certainly fits with my experience locally; the people whom various homeless charities have been dealing with increasingly have mental health issues, as well as being homeless.

The last estimate of the healthcare cost associated with the homeless population was £86 million a year in 2010; the figure will undoubtedly be higher now. That shows that we can save money for the public purse by tackling homelessness. The Scottish Government are committed to eradicating rough sleeping in Scotland. They have allocated £21 million to rapid rehousing in the past year. The money came from their “ending homelessness together” fund. As a result of the Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act 2003, local authorities in Scotland have a duty to find permanent accommodation for all applicants who are unintentionally homeless. Last year, The Guardian reported that the National Audit Office had stated that homelessness is “likely to have been driven by welfare reforms”, which brings us back to poverty, the issue at the heart of so much of the homelessness and housing issue.

It is not all bad news, though. A report authored by Crisis and PricewaterhouseCoopers estimated that allocating appropriate housing to homeless people improved their wellbeing, and increased economic output as a result of them entering employment. The same report stated that the Exchequer is projected to save a staggering £6,361 million as people are moved out of homelessness, through the reduced use of public services, ranging across everything from the NHS to criminal justice. We cannot afford to skimp on this. Austerity does not get us there. We need to spend money to save an absolute fortune by solving the problems.

Time is moving on, and there are so many aspects of the debate that I would have loved to have gone into. The debate is so wide-ranging, and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) contributed so well from her constituency—ends up in a direct cost to the NHS: unhealthy homes affect our mental and physical health, leading to increased pressure on the health service, whether that is on GP appointments, hospital beds spaces or carers. The NHS even has a diagnosis code for inadequate housing, which was listed as a secondary diagnosis in almost 3,500 hospital episodes in 2017-18. More than half were among those aged 65 or over.

Poor-quality housing has particularly disastrous effects on those on low incomes, many of whom lack the means to replace out-of-date boilers and central heating systems, or end up renting off unscrupulous landlords who let their homes fall into disrepair. My hon. Friend

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for bringing forward this important debate on a critical issue related to housing. It is reflective of the crisis in housing. From the contributions we have heard today, it is painfully clear that alongside the families left waiting for social housing, the young people unable to get on the property ladder and the thousands of rough sleepers on our streets, the NHS is suffering as a result of an ongoing housing crisis in which one in three people in the UK live in poor-quality housing.

If we take a short trip down memory lane, we will recall that the last Labour Government’s decent homes programme invested £22 billion and brought 1.4 million social homes up to a habitable standard. Contrast that with the position now: the English housing survey gave us data across the whole housing sector showing that 20% of homes in our country were considered non-decent in 2016. More than 500,000 social homes failed to meet the decent homes standard in 2017. That perhaps comes as no surprise when we consider that just £1.6 billion was spent on the decent homes programme between 2011 and 2015, when funding was stopped altogether, with the Government expecting councils, which are stretched to breaking, to pick up the pieces.

Cold and damp houses have a detrimental effect on health by increasing the risk of cardiovascular, respiratory and rheumatoid conditions. They can exacerbate the symptoms of arthritis and reduce dexterity among elderly people, thereby increasing the risk of falls. They cause mould, colds and flu. Being cold can impact a person’s ability to cook, shower and clean.

My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) painted a clear picture of how poor housing also affects our mental health. Our homes are places where our children grow up, where we celebrate milestones and where we spend a great deal of our time, so it is completely understandable that the state of our houses can have such a detrimental effect on our mental health. Research by Shelter indicates that 20% of adults have experienced mental health issues in the past five years as a result of housing problems. Further research by the Sustain project has found that the physical condition of someone’s home is strongly predictive of their mental health. According to Mind, people with a mental health condition are four times more likely to report that poor housing has made their health worse.

The Government’s failure to build anywhere near enough new and appropriate homes—my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) recognises this only too well from her constituency—ends up in a direct cost to the NHS: unhealthy homes affect our mental and physical health, leading to increased pressure on the health service, whether that is on GP appointments, hospital beds spaces or carers. The NHS even has a diagnosis code for inadequate housing, which was listed as a secondary diagnosis in almost 3,500 hospital episodes in 2017-18. More than half were among those aged 65 or over.

Poor-quality housing has particularly disastrous effects on those on low incomes, many of whom lack the means to replace out-of-date boilers and central heating systems, or end up renting off unscrupulous landlords who let their homes fall into disrepair. My hon. Friend
the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) made some excellent points about the difficulty of getting private rented sector properties up to standard, and reminded us all of the dangers of the silent killer that is carbon monoxide poisoning, which can often happen in homes of a lower standard. Those things all inevitably lead to avoidable GP appointments and hospital stays.

The cost of the lack of accessible housing cannot be overstated. Elderly and vulnerable people across the country struggle every day in homes that do not meet their needs. As Members have pointed out, some cannot afford to heat their homes properly. Just 7% of homes have basic accessibility features. Those who feel they can no longer live safely or comfortably in their homes are forced into care homes at a cost to their family, the state and their independence.

According to the Royal College of Physicians, falls cost the NHS £2 billion every year. However, many falls are not the inevitable result of ageing and could be easily avoided by removing hazards around the home. Fitting grab rails in bathrooms, building houses with walls strong enough to support grab rails, making sure homes have level access and building stairs with an easy-going pitch are all cost-effective ways to avert extremely damaging falls. Research by the Building Research Establishment indicates that removing category 1 hazards that lead to falls would save more than £400 million every year and would pay for itself within just five years. If we make those changes pre-emptively, the number of hospital bed days lost due to delays in hospital discharge while a suitable home is found will be dramatically reduced.

One of my constituents is a nurse at Scunthorpe General Hospital. She reported to me that she routinely has patients in her care who are forced to wait in hospital for up to three weeks longer than they should for changes to be made to their homes, or for a carer to be assigned. My local hospital trust says that one of the worst things for patients, particularly elderly patients, is to be in hospital longer than they should be. They are at increased risk of infection, and unfortunately that increases mortality rates. That really brings home how important getting housing right at every stage is to individuals’ life prospects, and NHS statistics reflect that.

An NHS annual report on delayed transfers of care in England in 2018 found that nearly 50,000 bed days were lost because of delayed discharges due to housing inadequacy, with patients waiting for major home adaptations, alternative housing arrangements, manual handling equipment such as a hoist, living equipment, a bed, deep cleaning, decorating, or basic decluttering.

The NHS is already on its knees. NHS doctors, nurses and workers deserve better than to be burdened by the failure of the Government to provide healthy homes. The Government cannot ignore the impact of their cuts to local government on the state of our housing. Environmental health departments have not been protected from very severe cuts, and many simply do not have the resources to enforce housing standards fully in their area. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate on the cost of unhealthy housing to the NHS. He is a long-standing advocate of healthy housing, and his knowledge and passion about the subject has been evident today. Indeed, I congratulate all Members who have spoken. The 11 contributors spoke with passion about the links between housing and health. I acknowledge and commend the amount of work that the hon. Gentleman has undertaken on behalf of his constituents and the public as chair of the all-party group on healthy homes and buildings. He has provided welcome scrutiny of one of this Government’s top priorities: safe, decent, housing. I have read the APPG’s white paper with interest and will use this opportunity to respond to that as well as today’s debate.

The APPG is carrying out very important work, and I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) and the hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) on their roles as co-chairs of the APPG, as well as my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) and the hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) on their work in the APPG.

I cannot speak to figures relating to the cost of unhealthy housing to the NHS, because that is not within my gift as a Minister for housing, but that does not mean that the Government do not acknowledge the cost of poor housing on health, and the cost is enough to justify driving through changes. Everyone deserves a decent and safe place to live, and we have seen clear improvements under this Government. The number of private rented homes failing to meet the decent homes standard is down 15% since 2010, which is a record low, and the number of social homes failing to meet the standard is down 32% since 2010: a near-record low.

However, the Government want more action to be taken, which is why our recent social housing Green Paper asks whether we should reconsider what constitutes a decent home. We supported the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018, introduced by the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), presents a real opportunity for tenants to take some control over their housing standards, but it will not replace the need for proper council enforcement, and the Government must consider whether cuts to local government truly offer value for money when they stop councils protecting tenants from unhealthy housing, and lead to less money in the pockets of our NHS.

We must take the health impact of our homes into account as we build for the future. The current state of affairs is unsustainable and places too much of the burden on the NHS. A change in the way that we build houses will reduce the cost of social care, give people a sense of independence, and allow the elderly to live an active lifestyle at home well into their 80s and 90s.

10.42 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. We have had an excellent debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on their work in the APPG.

The Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018, introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), presents a real opportunity for tenants to take some control over their housing standards, but it will not replace the need for proper council enforcement, and the Government must consider whether cuts to local government truly offer value for money when they stop councils protecting tenants from unhealthy housing, and lead to less money in the pockets of our NHS.

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However, the Government want more action to be taken, which is why our recent social housing Green Paper asks whether we should reconsider what constitutes a decent home. We supported the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018, introduced by the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), which gives tenants the right to take legal action if landlords fail in their duties, freeing local authorities to focus on using their existing strong and effective powers against rogue landlords.
I want to speak about the actions that the Government are taking on each point of the system. Again, I congratulate all the Members who have contributed today. My Department is reviewing building safety regulations, mindful of the needs of people in fuel poverty and the importance of maintaining air quality in our homes, and we are working across Government to ensure an holistic approach to building regulations. To answer the question asked by the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), we take the risks and consequences of carbon monoxide poisoning very seriously, which is why we committed to review carbon monoxide alarm requirements. I am pleased to say that the first stage of the review is complete and we have gathered information on the falling costs of alarms and on uncertainty about the fact that carbon monoxide poisonings are perhaps under-reported. We are now considering the updated evidence and will respond shortly.

Local authorities have strong powers under the Housing Act 2004 to tackle poor property conditions that might impact on people’s health. They must take enforcement action where the most serious hazards are present, which are usually assessed through the housing health and safety rating system—the HHSRS, which I always have difficulty saying. Enforcement activity can range from informal work with the landlord to emergency repairs or even prohibition of the use of the whole or part of the property in extreme circumstances. The HHSRS is crucial to local authorities’ enforcement of decent standards and thereby the protection of people’s health. That is why on 26 October 2018 we announced that we were commissioning a review to assess how well the HHSRS works in practice and to ensure it remains fit for purpose.

To reply to the hon. Member for Strangford, in October we laid regulations to extend mandatory licensing of houses in multiple occupation, bringing a further 170,000 HMOs within scope. It is an important tool for preventing overcrowding and the harms associated with it. I again congratulate the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) on her dedicated work on housing and her tenacity in fighting for her constituents.

Winter mortality is a result of many different factors, but it is clear that living in a cold home can lead to adverse outcomes for health and wellbeing. An investment of £3 billion a year demonstrates that it is not something that the Government take lightly. We have a comprehensive package of policies to support households over the winter months. All pensioner households receive winter fuel payments of £200 to £300, and more than 2 million low-income and vulnerable households receive a further £140 rebate through the warm home discount. Additional payments are made through the cold weather payment scheme during spells of cold weather. In addition, £640 million a year is currently available through the energy company obligation to upgrade homes, tackling fuel poverty in the long run.

Mr Sheerman: Can the Minister tell me what she thinks about going back to really firm standards, such as the Parker Morris standards? The review was originally a Conservative idea.

Mrs Wheeler: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on managing to mention Parker Morris at least three times in this debate. We are looking at future standards. Sometimes we need smaller homes as starter homes, but equally we need better-quality homes all the way through. I will perhaps come on to that later in my speech.

The health impacts of cold homes and fuel poverty require action from a wide range of organisations across the health and social care sector. Partnership approaches are key. Local authorities are now able to work with the charitable and health sectors to determine which households should be eligible for support under a new flexible element of the £640 million-a-year energy company obligation energy efficiency scheme, which is focused on low-income and vulnerable households.

There has been significant improvement in the average energy efficiency of fuel-poor homes. The latest fuel poverty statistics showed that there were nearly 800,000 fewer fuel-poor properties rated E, F or G in 2016 compared with 2010. I can tell my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives that the role of housing will be a crucial part of our considerations in the forthcoming social care Green Paper. I also note his pitch for a pilot. That shows that the policies are working to help those living in the least efficient homes, who can least afford to keep warm.

There is no doubt that it is essential that buildings are well ventilated, as the hon. Member for Huddersfield mentioned, for the health of the people in the building, and the health of the building itself. It is not merely a means to resolve overheating, but a matter of air quality. For that reason, part F of the building regulations sets minimum requirements to provide adequate means of ventilation. As set out in the Government’s clean air strategy, we plan to consult in spring 2019 “on changes to standards in Part F of the Building Regulations relating to ventilation in homes and other buildings.”

In setting minimum ventilation standards, we take advice from across Government on indoor air quality, including from the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and Public Health England. Indoor air quality is a complex issue, and many factors determine the concentration of pollutants in a space. Ventilation is one such factor, but outdoor air quality, the location of the building, emissions from products and the activities of occupants in the building all play a role as well.

Health and wellbeing can be affected by what is outside as well as inside a home. The revised national planning policy framework therefore includes a dedicated chapter that deals with the creation of healthy and safe places. It states:

“Planning policies and decisions should aim to achieve healthy, inclusive and safe places which... promote social interaction... are safe and accessible... and support healthy lifestyles”.

At my Department’s recent national design quality conference in Birmingham, attended by more than 400 representatives of the community and housing sector, we had a dedicated session on healthy place-making, and we recognised the importance of creating places that have a positive impact on health and wellbeing. On that matter, too, there is extensive cross-Government collaboration. As the hon. Member for Strangford is aware, my Department has been part of the NHS England healthy new towns programme and sits on the steering group. I hope that he will be pleased to hear that in 2019-20, NHS England will build on that by working with the Government to develop a healthy new Community.
towns standard, including a healthy homes quality mark to be awarded to places that meet high standards and principles that promote health and wellbeing.

The Government recognise the importance of having safe and healthy homes and buildings, and provide common definitions and approaches to regulation and standards, consistently striving to ensure that they remain up to date and effective. MHCLG has taken the lead on many aspects, from undertaking a comprehensive review of building safety to strengthening consumer redress. There is extensive cross-Government work on healthy homes and buildings, from planning and place-making to design, delivery and standards and support. Again, we take on board the comment about Parker Morris.

Officials across all policy areas regularly engage across all levels of Government, industry and the third sector. For example, we are an active signatory of the memorandum of understanding on improving health and care through the home. That joins us up with 25 other signatories, including the NHS, the Local Government Association and the Royal Society for Public Health. We have positive relationships with our counterparts in the devolved Administrations, but always welcome the opportunity to deepen engagement.

Perhaps the APPG for healthy homes and buildings is the place to examine which specific relationships could be strengthened. However, the responsibility for ensuring that homes and buildings are safe and healthy is a shared one, lying with product designers, developers, building owners and managers and local authorities, as well as central Government and devolved Administrations. That is why the work that the hon. Member for Strangford has undertaken through the APPG is so valuable, and why Ministers from my Department would be pleased to meet the group, to ensure that no stone is left unturned in our mission to make the housing market fit for everyone.

10.53 am

Jim Shannon: I thank everyone for their valuable contributions. As the Minister said, it has been a constructive debate. Everyone who contributed, whether with a speech or an intervention, added important information.

The hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) referred to removing people from fuel poverty, winter deaths, delivering social care, and how children learn better in warm homes. My hon. Friends the Members for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) and for Upper Bann (David Simpson), and the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), focused in their interventions on social housing and socioeconomic issues. Health and housing cannot be divorced, as the debate has reinforced.

The hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) referred to how house deterioration makes people physically and mentally ill, and to the issue of rogue landlords, which the Minister also mentioned. Tenants are at their wits’ end. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) referred to 200 homes with water rising under the floorboards. She is clearly in touch with her constituents when it comes to raising the standard and condition of older homes. She referred to the APPG for ageing and older people, and security in later life, which is important.

The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) referred to carbon monoxide and cowboy builders. Old homes need to be upgraded, but social housing, private rented accommodation, student accommodation and smoke alarms are also all critical issues. The hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), the Scottish National party spokesperson, spoke of the debate’s importance, and how homes must be warm, dry and affordable. He gave us a Scottish perspective on the issues. Again, overcrowding, pressure and family relationships are so important. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), described how many homes are not up to standard. She talked about low incomes, renting from disreputable landlords, health and infections in homes. Those issues are all important.

I thank the Minister for responding so well to all our contributions and questions. It is always a pleasure to be in her company, and it was a pleasure to hear her response to the points that we made on cold homes, healthy place-making, and safe, decent housing. She responded by showing her commitment to those issues. I am very pleased that she suggested a meeting. It is very clear to me that on safety regulations, she answered the questions regarding healthy homes and buildings.

I thank the secretariat of the APPG for healthy homes and buildings, who are in the Gallery, for their valuable contribution to making this happen, and to the white paper inquiry and its conclusions. We have all contributed to a very important debate on healthy homes and buildings and the NHS. There is so much more that we can do. Today we demonstrated to the Minister, singularly and collectively, that there is so much more that we can do. We are all committed, alongside the Minister, to ensuring that we deliver on that.

Again, I thank all Members for their contributions, and for being here on a Tuesday morning. It is such a pleasure to be here on a Tuesday morning, rather than at 3.30 on a Thursday afternoon.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the cost of unhealthy housing to the NHS.
Animal Rescue Homes

10.57 am

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered regulation of animal rescue homes.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank the Minister for attending this debate, on an issue of great importance to our constituencies.

Many MPs will, like me, have rescue centres in their constituencies, serving to protect animals who have been abandoned or whose owners cannot look after them due to ill health. Such centres offer an invaluable service to communities across the UK, especially as we are a nation well known for our love of animals and pets. It is estimated that our pet population last year was an incredible 9 million dogs and 8 million cats. That means that an estimated 44% of households own a pet.

However, with so many pets across the country, sometimes things go wrong. For various reasons, an estimated 250,000 animals go to rescue centres each year. In their time of need, we expect those animals to receive the best possible care, and thankfully the vast majority do. I have had the pleasure of visiting some such rescue centres, and we all appreciate the amazing work that they carry out across the sector. Their work is invaluable, and it is a testament to the passion that those working in the field have for animal welfare that a great many of them do so voluntarily. Visiting Battersea Dogs and Cats Home recently brought into sharp relief for me the impact of rescue shelters and rehoming shelters, not just because of the high value that is placed on animal welfare, but because of the social impact of such well-run centres. In each of the clean and well-maintained rooms was a story. Some were sad—some made my heart ache—but I left there happy that day. I was happy that all the animals in the care of Battersea were being looked after to the highest of standards and by people who had the interests of the animals at heart.

My own cat, Lucky, who I got just over two years ago, was rescued from a building site by Cats Protection. I got to meet the amazing foster mum who was looking after him and other cats in her home. It was heart-warming to see the love and commitment from a volunteer, who helps cats to socialise and supports those who desperately need a home.

Although we have fantastic organisations and volunteers doing great work, there are some that take advantage of the lack of regulation or are simply not equipped to manage the welfare of already vulnerable and distressed animals. Without regulation, animals may not be adequately checked for diseases, they may live in cramped and overcrowded conditions and they may not be given the tailored support vulnerable animals need. It is often only after many complaints or accusations that the issue of competence or regulation is ever raised.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): I am delighted that this debate is taking place. I visited Battersea Dogs and Cats Home only yesterday and came away with a very positive impression. I have been supporting the idea of reintroducing dog licensing, so that we know where dogs are, which would help to deal with any problems, but it was brought to my attention that when introducing legislation, we want to be awfully careful not to drive things underground. Does the hon. Lady agree that we need to tread carefully as we consider introducing legislation?

Jo Platt: I will come on to the Government consultation later; smaller charities and those who do this work voluntarily, without the shelter of a larger organisation, do have concerns, and legislation is about supporting those people as well. The hon. Gentleman makes an important point.

We know that good guidance and transparency works. Membership of the Association of Dogs and Cats Homes has raised standards in rescue centres—I am pleased to have seen the work of such organisations at first hand—but that is sadly not the case for a large number of shelters and refuges across the country. When I tried to research how many rescue centres operate in the UK and how many face any regulation or scrutiny at all, the statistics were simply not there. Nobody had any idea. I asked each local authority in England how many centres operated in their districts. About half of the councils that responded did not know how many rescue homes they had in their area. In those that did, only 18% of shelters had any regulation at all, through their voluntary membership of the ADCH—although the vast majority of those not taking part in the self-regulation scheme are beyond reproach in their efficacy and attention to the welfare of animals in their care.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): Recently, the Blue Cross reported an increase in rescue centres that import dogs from abroad and sell them to members of the public. They are obviously not genuine rescue centres. Does the hon. Lady agree that the Government need to discourage that practice and ensure that only genuine rescue centres are recognised?

Jo Platt: I absolutely agree. There is an issue of understanding what we are dealing with—how many people are opening up as refuge centres and sanctuaries, and how many are doing that voluntarily. There are people who are probably not getting the support they need to look after vulnerable animals.

I have heard some truly horrific stories, and formal regulation is now surely necessary to ensure that the care of all animals is of the highest standards, regardless of their circumstances. I am particularly pleased that in the Government’s recent consultation on third-party sales of pets, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs recognised the deficiency in animal rescue centre regulation. I understand that 90% of respondents agreed that there needed to be regulation. With a constructive approach, I hope we can work together on this important issue to make regulation work in the best interests of pet welfare.

When I previously asked DEFRA why rescue homes are not licensed, the answer was that smaller charities or single volunteers would struggle. That is a legitimate concern, but not one without solutions. We need to collect data on the number of rescue homes operating. We must also assess the impact any regulations will have on local authorities. Cuts to central funding often currently impair local councils from providing enforcement on a range of civil matters, and legislation for animal shelters must make provision to ensure that, where concerns are
raised or scrutiny of provision is required, the regulatory body responsible has the necessary tools to ensure best practice is maintained.

Any licensing regime must also ensure that applications are from those with the right skills, dedication and resourcing to protect the long-term welfare of the animals. Community operators, often with a small number of animals in their charge, also provide immediate and ongoing care for animals in need and are extremely valuable, both in terms of the service they provide for animals and in their wider community. However, they should not be simply exempt from a requirement to be recognised and regulated. In such cases, perhaps an accreditation to a larger organisation would negate the possibility of smaller groups being unable to function with the additional regulations.

I have laid out just a few of the areas that I hope we can work on, across party lines, to put animal welfare first. As a nation of dedicated animal lovers, I am sure that is what our constituents expect from us. The Minister can count on my support and that of many others in realising a new regulatory framework for animal shelters and rescue centres that protects our most vulnerable animals and gives the public confidence that animals are receiving the best possible care in all cases. Animals who are in need of shelter or need to find a new home should be expected to receive good care regardless of which organisation provides it.

One thing is uniting the animal charity sector—they all agree that regulation is urgently needed. Cats Protection say that regulation would provide transparency, helping to ensure consistent and high welfare for animals within sanctuaries or rehoming centres. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals points out that without regulation the forthcoming ban on third-party sales could result in current third parties disguising themselves as rescue centres to evade regulation, and warns how easy that would be, as some pet shops already operate charitable arms. It concludes that the regulation of rescue centres is the best option, a view reiterated by the majority of rescue centres I have spoken and met, despite the additional burden it would place on them.

Ultimately, if animal welfare is their guiding motivation, rescue centres will always welcome measures to ensure they are doing all they can to help the animals they look after. That is why we must build on the work of the ADCH, with its incredibly robust framework that strives to drive up standards in animal welfare. It provides a strong basis and starting point for the regulation needed, as well as the support network to promote best practice and assist member organisations to continually raise their levels of care.

I hope that in answering the debate this morning the Minister can update us on the progress of the consultation, outline a timetable in which regulation could be introduced and commit to working together in the interests of animal welfare and the sector as a whole. What has become clear to anyone looking at this issue is that we must regulate and license animal shelters and rescue homes to ensure adequate levels of care. We must close the loophole that would allow third-party dealers to pose as shelters to evade the ban, and we must provide the resourcing and powers to give real teeth to any regulatory system. I look forward to hearing the plans to finally make that happen and recommit my support to any efforts to ensure that this is a system that does justice to our incredible rescue centres.

11.8 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank the hon. Member for Leigh (Jo Platt) for securing this debate on a subject that I know is very dear to the hearts of many people, and is particularly close to her heart. I respect the amount of hard work she has put into fully understanding this subject and into pressing for further action, for which she is to be commended. I am also grateful for the contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling), with his particular interest in the subject, and my hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns).

The hon. Member for Leigh has set out clearly her concerns about regulation of animal rescue and rehoming centres. She has sincerely and strongly held views, and I agree that we must do everything we can to ensure that good welfare practices are in place in all animal rescue homes. With that in mind, I recognise that the vast majority of animal rescue homes up and down the country are legitimate, and I pay tribute to the valuable work they do in rescuing and rehoming thousands of sick, abandoned and stray animals each year. The work of rescue homes can too easily be taken for granted, and we should remember that most people working at them are volunteers who are incredibly dedicated to the welfare of the animals in their care.

The RSPCA, the Dogs Trust and Battersea Dogs and Cats Home have been referred to on a number of occasions. I was fortunate enough to visit Battersea just before Christmas, when we announced the third-party sales ban. Redwings Horse Sanctuary and World Horse Welfare are also well known to us, as is Cats Protection. They do a brilliant job of caring for and rehoming animals in a responsible and dedicated manner. We can be confident that the animals in these organisations are spoken and met, despite the additional burden it would place on them.

We should not forget that the smaller and lesser-known rescue homes also do really important work in taking care of unwanted and stray animals. The Government value the work of these legitimate, committed animal rescue homes. Without them, many animals would face abandonment and an uncertain future. From our preliminary work exploring this sector with the various bodies that have an interest, we know there is a large and diverse animal rescue and rehoming sector in the UK.

The hon. Member for Leigh indicated the findings of her research. We estimate that those organisations rescue and rehome somewhere in the region of 140,000 cats, 110,000 dogs and 3,000 horses per year. There are various types of organisations that operate according to different models. In addition to their relative size and the types of animals they rehome, one of the main differences between organisations is whether they care for animals in one central place or rely on other people to provide foster care for their animals. It is important to understand this distinction, because their regulation could be very different. We know that the majority of
those organisations are registered charities, which means that they meet the requirements set by the Charity Commission—for example, in respect of their finances.

For some rehoming centres, membership of the Association of Dogs and Cats Homes brings key benefits. The chair of the ADCH is Claire Horton, who I am sure is well known to many hon. Members present. She is the chief executive of Battersea Dogs and Cats Home and a member of the Animal Health and Welfare Board for England, which reports to Ministers in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Under Claire’s skilled chairing, ADCH has developed clear good practice guidelines for the sector and encouraged more centres to come under its influence. I encourage other rehoming centres that are not members of ADCH to consider joining it for the benefits and advice that are available.

The hon. Member for Leigh set out her clear concerns about some rehoming centres and the need for them to be regulated. I agree that, sadly, some rescue homes, for whatever reason, fall below an acceptable standard of welfare. As with any keeper of animals, animal rescue homes must provide for the welfare needs of their animals, as required by the Animal Welfare Act 2006, but they are not licensed in the same way as dog breeding or pet shops. In February 2018 we issued a call for evidence on our proposal to ban the commercial third-party sale of puppies and kittens. In response, many stakeholders pointed out that we should also consider closer regulation of rescue homes, as the hon. Lady pointed out. Their point was that we need to address concerns about animal welfare standards in some unscrupulous rescue homes, and to address concerns that third-party sellers would simply set up as rescue homes to avoid proposed bans. The Government definitely share those concerns.

Giles Watling: The Minister mentioned unscrupulous rescue homes; are not many rescue homes set up by well-meaning people who want to do the very best, but who suddenly become overwhelmed by the number of animals they take on board? It is more to do with outreach—getting in touch with these people to inform and educate them, so that we can help them to run a proper home, rather than their filling their houses with many animals that they cannot manage.

David Rutley: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Most of these homes—the vast majority—are set up with good intentions in mind, and sometimes those setting them up can be overwhelmed. However, there is support available, and in the months ahead we need to ensure that it is readily available and understood.

It is worth responding to the point on dog licensing made by the hon. Member for Leigh. We stopped dog licensing in 1988 due to low compliance. Those countries that have dog licensing schemes invariably still have low compliance rates. We have found it much more effective to rely on compulsory microchipping, and our focus is on increasing its uptake.

The consultation on the third-party sale ban, which we took forward in August 2018, attracted nearly 7,000 responses, and we published the summary of responses in December 2018. As a result of concerns being expressed similar to those articulated by the hon. Member for Leigh, the summary of responses document makes it clear that we will bring in a ban on third-party sellers of puppies and kittens as soon as possible. The document also made it clear that we would undertake further consultations with key stakeholders, such as welfare charities, vets and local authorities, on the idea of licensing rescue and rehoming centres, with a particular focus on centres that rescue and rehome dogs, cats and horses.

The Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018, which came into force in October, already require licensing of commercial pet sellers, dog breeders and certain other activities involving animals. The regulations provide the tools for regulating rescue and rehoming centres. We would need to set out the necessary specific conditions for such centres, which the sector is happy to help develop. However, I want to make it clear that in regulating this sector, we need to be confident of the benefits and the impacts, particularly on some of the smaller rescue and rehoming charities, which is why we are exploring these issues with the organisations involved. The hon. Member for Leigh alluded to that in her speech, and I hope she will understand that we are taking some time to ensure that we get our approach to the various aspects of the sector absolutely right.

The RSPCA is a member of the ADCH. The charity says that in the past eight years it has investigated some 11 individuals and obtained 80 convictions against five persons involved in animal rescue. A further two people received a caution. These cases involved a total of over 150 animals of different species, including dogs, cats, horses, farm animals and birds. This is despite the ongoing assistance that the RSPCA gives to failing establishments to ensure that they meet the needs of the animals under their care. My hon. Friend the Member for Clacton alluded to the fact that support was required. The RSPCA does fantastic work in this area, which can involve years of work in providing advice and education to the same establishment. Sometimes those organisations fall foul of the law, which is when the RSPCA can get involved, as can local authorities in some cases.

Although regulation could benefit the rehoming sector and, importantly, the welfare of animals involved, we must remember the work and contributions of smaller rescue centres, which in the vast majority of cases do all they can to promote the welfare of animals in their care. Many of these centres are not members of ADCH, and we are discovering that there are likely to be hundreds out there. The latest estimates indicate that there are over 1,000 organisations operating in England that rehome and rescue dogs, cats and equines. In a way, that fits with the analysis that the hon. Member for Leigh obtained through her freedom of information request.

Clearly, we are dealing with many hundreds of these organisations. DEFRA is working with them and other welfare organisations to build a better understanding of the issues for smaller organisations. We want to work with them to improve the standards of welfare in those that are operating genuinely with the best intentions. More can be done to address the work of well-intentioned rehoming centres in the context of puppy imports. I have zero tolerance for unscrupulous dealers—I am sure the hon. Member for Leigh and other hon. Members share my view—who clearly abuse the pet travel scheme to traffic underage puppies into the UK. These puppies travel long journeys in very poor conditions and are not effectively protected against serious diseases, such as rabies and tapeworm, which pose a risk to their health.
as well as to that of other animals and people. These puppies spend their early weeks of life facing unacceptable welfare and health conditions, and we must put a stop to this.

A key aspect of tackling puppy smuggling and assisting rehoming centres in their work is helping the public better to understand how to responsibly purchase or adopt a puppy and raising awareness of puppy smuggling. Through the umbrella body, the Canine and Feline Sector Group, we are in early discussions with key stakeholders on the development of a behaviour change campaign. I strongly believe that a unified message across Government and respected non-governmental organisations can have a real impact, and I look forward to working together with our partners and hon. Members to achieve this. We can work with them to share our early understanding of this and develop a better approach, and I look forward to engaging with them on this issue.

We must also guard against those who might be tempted to set up a rescue and rehoming operation with the primary intention of profiting from the public’s appetite for pets, and effectively operating a pet-selling business, rather than a genuine rescue and rehoming charity, as my hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood said. Pet-selling businesses should be regulated under the animal activity licensing regulations introduced in October 2018. We will help local authorities with clear guidance to help them distinguish between those selling pets and genuine rehoming centres.

The Government have made it clear that we take animal welfare very seriously. We have a clear, positive action plan and have followed it up with a series of plans and actions, including updating and improving the laws on the licensing of certain animal-related activities, increasing the maximum penalties for animal cruelty, banning third-party sales of puppies and kittens, and looking at the options for licensing rehoming centres to ensure all rescue homes meet good standards of animal welfare. We will take the steps necessary to address the concerns relating to the regulation of rehoming centres and animal rescue centres. I thank the hon. Member for Leigh for securing this debate and for giving us the opportunity to debate these important issues.

Question put and agreed to.

11.21 am

Sitting suspended.
all agree that education is a universal human right, but due to inequality, millions of children are still locked out of education simply because of who they are and where they live. Members of Parliament would not countenance the idea that the children in the poorest parts of our constituencies do not go to school while those in more affluent polling districts get an education, but on a larger scale that is essentially what is happening in the world today.

In 2017, I had the privilege of joining a parliamentary delegation to Tanzania alongside the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith), the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) and Lord Watts. I want to reflect on some of what I saw on the ground as I travelled through Dodoma, Siguata and Dar es Salaam. To understand better the challenges we face in global education, let us drill down and see why such inequality in education persists. First, unequal education systems around the world perpetuate and reinforce inequality, as the critical early years of education are neglected in development, humanitarian and crisis settings. Put simply, schools that serve disadvantaged communities, despite the fact that they have the greatest needs, have the poorest teaching and learning environments because they are under-resourced and under-supported. Disadvantaged communities are more likely to suffer from a shortage of schools and only have schools that are of the poorest infrastructure quality. Basic things such as a lack of sanitary provision at schools means that there are further consequences for young female students, in particular.

Secondly, inadequate domestic resources mean that education systems are under-financed. Far too many Governments still fail to meet the internationally recommended allocation of 15% to 20% of total public expenditure allocated to education. Education budgets are often spent without enough sensitivity and attention to reaching the furthest-behind groups. That often creates a situation in which households have to bear the significant financial burden of paying fees to send their children to school. Fees remain a major barrier to education for the world’s poorest. We need greater and more effective international financing, as aid to education is stagnating. In short, domestic and international education financing should be underpinned by progressive universality and expanding provision for all, while focusing on the furthest behind.

Thirdly, many children are locked out of learning because their identities are culturally devalued or because of a lack of political representation. Discrimination can be explicit through laws and policies that exclude certain groups of children from learning, such as national education systems that prevent refugee children’s access to education, or implicit through social and cultural norms, such as taboos and myths about menstruation, which prevent girls from attending school, or the perception that children with disabilities are unable to learn.

I was appalled to learn that young girls in Tanzania miss at least one month of the school year due to menstruation. According to the Netherlands Development Organisation’s baseline survey report on schoolgirls menstrual hygiene management, about 84% of schools have no hand-washing facilities. Village girls either use inappropriate materials to manage menstrual flow or simply miss school altogether. We see period poverty on a massive scale, with hugely detrimental consequences.

Many girls struggle to complete their studies because of teenage pregnancies. A 2010 report from the United Nations stated that about 8,000 Tanzanian girls per year are forced to leave school due to teenage pregnancy. We know from experience how difficult it is for them to return.

I want to turn to children with disabilities. When I visited a school in the Bahi district, I witnessed a child with a hearing impairment sitting at the very back of the class with no hearing aid. I questioned the logic of that with the teacher. There are also issues relating to how we resource teachers, and the training and resources they get. For example, Babi Makulu Primary School had 804 pupils and just 12 teachers, whose training was extremely limited, not least regarding additional support needs provision.

Fourthly, there are issues relating to accountability. Unless decision makers are held accountable for the progress of the most marginalised in education, the learning crisis will persist. Accountability for the most marginalised children in education is difficult, given that there are few countries that collect sufficient data to identify and track the children who are falling furthest behind. Too many children remain invisible in datasets, including children in conflict and crisis-affected contexts, and children with disabilities. Decision makers must commit to collecting more data and using it to map how inequalities intersect and overlap, and to plan interventions and investment accordingly.

Having comprehensively set the scene, I want to turn to the action we should take. I commend the schools in the east end in my constituency and those right across the UK that will be joining Send My Friend to School in its “Unlock Education for Everyone” campaign by creating paper keys depicting the inequality in education around the world. They will present those keys to Members of Parliament and will call on the UK Government to unlock education for everyone.

That brings me nicely to some of my asks of the Minister. I sent them to her in advance, so I am not just about to bombard her with lots of questions. What can the British Government do? I believe that they should reaffirm and champion the “leave no one behind” pledge in education and lead on its implementation. They should also use international meetings and events, including the G7, G20 and the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, to press other Governments and international organisations to take action to address intersecting inequalities in education. In determining global policy, we should engage and collaborate with disadvantaged and marginalised children and their families at the grassroots level. That should include engagement with teachers and their unions, developing partners and networks, including the organisations that represent local people, and locally based community groups.

On our work with other countries, the UK Government should work with developing-country partner Governments and other key stakeholders to support inclusive gender and disability-responsive education sector plans and budgets, to ensure that no child or young person is left behind. For our part, we should ensure that all UK-funded education programmes, including development and humanitarian programmes, disaggregate data by age, socioeconomic status, gender, immigration and disability, and where possible, by ethnicity and locality.
We should also build measures for evaluating the impact and effectiveness of programmes in addressing intersecting inequalities in all education programmes. That should include specific measures to evaluate their impact in including and providing quality education to the marginalised. We should also promote the importance of holistic, cross-Government and cross-sectoral commitment and action to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4, particularly across Ministries of education, finance, gender, health and child protection, in tandem with civil society.

When it comes to ensuring that we invest equitably, the Government should commit to increasing financing for education and ensuring that it reaches the hardest to reach. That can be done, for example, by renewing and increasing the UK’s commitment to Education Cannot Wait. We could support the inclusive education initiative and advocate for additional donors to support the fund. We should support the Global Partnership for Education financially and through critical engagement with its governance and operations.

We should encourage any new mechanisms in the education financing architecture that would deliver on the “leave no one behind” education pledge, including through adopting equity-based stepping-stone targets. We should accelerate progress for hard-to-reach adolescent girls through continued support for the girls’ education challenge and by strengthening its approach to addressing intersecting inequalities.

Having set out that long list of asks and questions for the Government, I will round off, not with clunky data or questions, but with a case study. Aquira is head girl at her community school in rural Zambia. She says:

“When I was younger, my uncle took me to Lusaka, the capital city of Zambia, and his wife made me into a maid. I did the housework, cooking, and looked after their children. After some time, I was 10 years old and I contacted my mum and said Uncle wasn’t taking me to school so she said she would come and get me. But my Uncle refused.”

Aquira was eventually able to return to school, after contacting her mother again, but she continues to face obstacles. She says:

“Sometimes, I stopped coming to school because of money.”

Aquira faces many barriers in her education journey, including a rural location, gender discrimination, employment and fees. None the less, she is supported by her family and her community to go to school, so she can realise her dream of becoming a nurse. That is Aquira’s story.

Hon. Members have perhaps noticed that I have been wearing a rather wonderful tartan tie throughout the debate. It is the school tie of Mount Vernon Primary School in my constituency. I have visited that school on a number of occasions and I know that the children there receive a first-class education, which they get because we as a society have chosen to invest in their education and provide them with the resources that they need. The distance from Mount Vernon Primary School to Aquira’s school in Zambia is well over 7,600 miles, but in an educational sense, they are probably even further apart.

My message to the Government today is crystal clear: let us get to a place where children like Aquira receive the same high-quality education as the children at Mount Vernon who proudly wear these ties. With political will and the support of hon. Members, as well as that of our constituents, that is not an unachievable aim, but one towards which we should all be proud to work.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate can last until 4 o’clock. I am obliged to call the Front Benches no later than 3.27 pm, when the SNP, Her Majesty’s Opposition and the Minister will each have 10 minutes. David Linden will have three minutes at the end to sum up. Until 3.27 pm, we will hear Back-Bench speeches. We will start with Henry Smith.

2.44 pm

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Thank you, Mr Hollobone, for calling me in this important debate on global education for the most marginalised. It is a pleasure, once again, to serve under your chairmanship. In the light of those time constraints, I will attempt to be brief. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing this important debate and on the powerful message in his speech.

Earlier this month, I received an email from the assistant headteacher of Northgate Primary School in my constituency, to let me know that, like many schools up and down the UK, it will take part in the Send My Friend To School campaign this year. The school has invited me to its year 5 assembly in support of that cause. I was delighted to accept the invitation and I look forward to meeting the pupils and teachers at the school in a few weeks’ time. I will share with them a copy of Hansard so that they can read this debate for themselves.

Half of all children with disabilities in low and middle-income countries do not go to school at all. I know that I am not alone in my experience of visiting schools in the developing world—the hon. Member for Glasgow East mentioned our visit to Tanzania with RESULTS UK—and I echo the concern about the many children, particularly those with disabilities such as visual or hearing impairments, who are often at the back of a very large classroom. I have seen classrooms of over 100 students where those with special educational needs are marginalised. They really need to be at the front, especially in a classroom environment that would be challenging for any of us given the numbers involved. There is also more deliberate exclusion, with certain groups of children sometimes being blocked by laws and policies restricting their access to education, as we heard in the introductory speech.

Northgate Primary in my constituency and hundreds of other schools across the UK are supporting the call to “unlock education for everyone”. Through its support for the Global Partnership for Education and the Girls’ Education Challenge, the UK has supported 11.4 million children, including 40,000 girls with disabilities, to gain a decent education. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State places a high importance on the role of education, and I urge her to continue to ensure that the UK Government use forums such as the G7, G20, the UN and others, to keep this matter at the forefront.

It must never be forgotten that UK aid is of course British taxpayers’ money. UK support for education in the developing world goes far beyond what the Government can do. My constituency of Crawley is home to Vision
Aid Overseas, which, for more than 30 years, has helped some of the world’s poorest people to see more clearly. Their Christmas appeal last year exceeded its target of raising £50,000 to help provide school-based eye health services across Ethiopia, Zambia and Sierra Leone to over 180,000 children. Crawley can be proud of the contribution that a locally based charity is making globally.

Vision Aid Overseas has been supported by the Department for International Development, with a three-year project to help improve the livelihoods and educational outcomes of adults and children across rural Ethiopia—a country where up to 10% of children have easily correctable vision problems. More than 184,000 patients were screened during the programme, with almost 15,000 of them receiving glasses and over 5,000 being referred for minor surgery. The organisation also trained more than 700 teachers to be able to identify common eye issues in their students, which has resulted in more than 2,500 children who previously struggled to see receiving new prescription glasses. Almost three quarters of children surveyed at the conclusion of the programme showed an improvement in their grades, reaffirming that promoting eye health in schools can improve children’s attainment in a tangible way.

That is only one example, but a reminder of what can be done to support and empower some of the poorest and most marginalised. Up and down the UK, such efforts are being made by groups such as Vision Aid Overseas in my constituency.

I hope that the students of Northgate Primary School in Crawley will be able to look at this debate to see how seriously we are taking this issue across the House. Schools in this country realise the importance of ensuring that all young people get a chance of an education, which will better help a more secure and prosperous world for all our futures.

2.50 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing this important debate off the back of a new report from the Send My Friend to School coalition. One of the recommendations in the report is:

“Ensure Official Development Assistance to education is free from commercial interests, does not support for profit providers, and ensures education is free and universally available at the point of use.”

On that basis, I want to use this opportunity to add to the debate by speaking about the people I met in Nairobi, as their voices are not in the room.

Last year, while in Nairobi, I heard at first hand from parents and teachers about the problems they face with low-fee private schools. Parents spoke about unaffordable fees, and teachers spoke about poor labour standards. The situation was so extreme that they felt driven to lodge a complaint with the World Bank about Bridge International. The report findings are echoed by the International Development Committee. Its inquiry into DFID’s education work expressed concerns about the inability of Bridge to reach the poorest and most marginalised children, and questioned the sustainability of the costs of providing education in that way.

Supporting a model that leaves out the poorest and most marginalised means that we would fail in our commitments under the SDGs to ensure that no one is left behind. I am pleased that DFID no longer uses official development assistance to fund Bridge schools, but I want reassurance. First, do the Government agree with Labour that that model of low fee for-profit education is not the way to deliver education to the most marginalised children? Secondly, will the Minister, in her summing up, guarantee that the Government will commit to not supporting such education models in future?

I welcome the recommendations of the new Send My Friend to School report, in particular the one calling on the Government to ensure that education ODA is “free from commercial interests” and does not support for-profit providers, and that “education is free and universally available at the point of use.”

I recognise that children in the global south deserve the same standards that we expect for our children in the UK.

As I come to a close, I will echo what the hon. Member for Glasgow East said. I too believe that no one in this debate would disagree that all children in the UK have the right to access free public education, regardless of their postcode. I also believe that that standard should be core to our overseas development work on education.

2.54 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. It is also a great pleasure to follow all three of the previous speakers in this debate.

I wish to contribute a comment in my role as the Prime Minister’s trade envoy to Nigeria. Many Members who have heard me speak before about it will know that I look on that job not simply as one about trade but as one with a wider perspective of the UK’s relations with Nigeria. Education has been a great factor in that.

I will first comment on the figures mentioned, such as our commitment to spend 0.7% of gross national income to fund foreign aid. If we think about that for a minute, it means that for every £100 that we earn, only 70p goes to foreign aid. That is all that the commitment is, so I find it amazing that it generates such hostile press for some people in the UK. When I looked at the DFID figures—I praise the Department enormously for its work—education took up something like 11% of the budget. I do not know whether the figure remains the same, but it is about 11%, which is a substantial contribution.

Like the two previous speakers, I want to comment on the Send My Friend to School programme. My hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) made a comment about the Hansard report, and I found that the response of No. 10 to submissions from schools involved in that programme has been outstanding. It has been very supportive of the whole initiative, which has gone down incredibly well with the schoolchildren.

On that basis, let us look at what we fund and how we should fund it. The first point to make is that, although it is difficult on 11% of the budget to segment the market, there is a need to improve girls’ education, in particular in Nigeria. I have been very pleased to see programmes undertaken by DFID to improve girls’
education. I noticed one in particular, which was intended to improve the social and economic basis on which girls had opportunities to exist in the country.

Why is the role of girls in Nigeria important? We do not have to look far. In recent news programmes, we have seen the kidnap of so many girls in Nigeria, and their use and misuse by Boko Haram, and that is the origin of my fears. I have also made a much broader point to the leaders of that country over a number of years: they will not defeat Boko Haram by military means; they will have to defeat it by giving the people of the area something that they do not already have. One such thing that they can give is education, which can play a great role in that.

It is also important to look not only at education itself but at the other side of the coin, which is the provision of training for teachers. In Nigeria, one impressive project is to train another 66,000 effective mathematicians as teachers, its particular effect being to improve the lives of up to 2 million children. That is something we should all be proud of, because we are talking not just about people—the girls and the teachers—but about the quality of schools, of teachers and of the learning, which all need to be improved.

2.59 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I join my colleagues in congratulating the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing this debate and on setting out the case in such a powerful and comprehensive opening speech. He began by talking about the challenge of winning the public argument on 0.7% and our commitment to the poorest people in the poorest countries of the world. The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) also made that case very well. Investing in global education is one of the best ways in which we can ensure value for taxpayers’ money, but as my colleague from the International Development Committee, the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) said, that is often matched by voluntary public donations to charities and other civil society organisations.

I chair the all-party parliamentary group on global education. We receive secretariat support from RESULTS UK. Like other Members, I have made a visit with RESULTS, although I went to Liberia, where we looked primarily at some of the health challenges after Ebola. We also took the opportunity to look at some of the education challenges that that country faces. I join others in paying tribute to the fantastic Send My Friend to School campaign. It is a remarkable coalition that mobilises children and young people in this country in solidarity with children and young people in some of the poorest countries around the world. I am especially pleased that Send My Friend has decided this year to focus its efforts on the most marginalised children—hence the focus of today’s debate. I urge the Minister to give serious consideration to the recommendations in the Send My Friend report.

Every child deserves an education, but as the hon. Member for Henley rightly reminded us, they deserve a quality education. The shift in public policy on global education to greater priority on quality alongside quantity is vital. Millions continue to miss out on that basic human right to a quality education simply because of who they are or where they live. Existing inequalities in societies are reinforced when the various exclusion factors overlap. Education is crucial if we are to tackle the twin evils of global poverty and global inequality. Rightly, it runs through the core of the sustainable development goals, most explicitly in SDG 4, which commits the world to improving access, quality and equity in education. It is worth mentioning that the sustainable development goals are universal—they apply here as well as in other parts of the world. We still have challenges in our own country to do with addressing inequalities and quality in our education system.

After the 2016 general election, the International Development Committee decided to complete its predecessor’s work, which led to the publication in November of that year of our report “DFID’s work on education: Leaving no one behind?” We reached the conclusion that the Department for International Development has prioritised investment in education in a way that many other donors have not. We welcome that priority, but we also said that if global goal 4 is to be achieved, all donors must considerably increase the amount of aid allocated to global education. For that reason, we called on the UK to go further than the 10% or 11% of recent years, to commit to allocating a larger proportion of our overseas aid to education.

As part of that inquiry, we visited refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon, mostly to look at how they provide education to children who have fled conflict in Syria. While we were in Jordan, we visited a very impressive United Nations Relief and Works Agency school for Palestinian children. Last month UNRWA launched its 2019 emergency appeal and budget requirement, which totalled more than $1 billion. That is the amount it needs simply to maintain last year’s level of service. At a time when the Trump Administration have cut their support for the UN Relief and Works Agency, we need to work with our international partners to ensure the funding gap left by US reductions is closed, to protect services for Palestinian children.

The Committee’s attention on education for the most marginalised has continued; next week we will publish our report on forced displacement in Africa. As the hon. Member for Glasgow East said in his opening speech, refugee children are five times more likely to be out of school than children on the whole; in fact, the majority of registered refugee children around the world are simply not in school. Children caught in crises that are not of their making should not be denied their right to an education, but humanitarian finance suffers from being short term and unpredictable.

Education Cannot Wait tells us that education in emergencies gets just 1.9% of all humanitarian spending—that is less than one fiftieth. I welcome the leading role that DFID has played in the development of Education Cannot Wait. The Minister will know that Education Cannot Wait is due for replenishment this year. I echo the hon. Member for Glasgow East and ask the Minister to give a commitment that the Government will continue to support Education Cannot Wait. Indeed, I will go further and ask for an increased UK commitment to Education Cannot Wait, and an early announcement, so that we can trigger additional support from other donors.
Save the Children reports that more than 70% of Rohingya children who have escaped genocide in Myanmar are out of school in Bangladesh. UNICEF warned that “if we don’t make the investment in education now, we face the very real danger of seeing a ‘lost generation’ of Rohingya children”.

In our report, the International Development Committee recommended a long-term strategy for education in emergencies. The tragic reality is that as conflicts become more protracted, if education provision is ignored, the futures of those children are put at real risk.

A number of Members, most notably the hon. Member for Crawley, who is the Committee’s rapporteur on education, reminded us that disabled children face some of the greatest barriers to education. That is the case in our constituencies, and it is even more the case in some of the poorest countries in the world. Recent analysis estimates that half of disabled children in low and middle-income countries are out of school. In some countries, the figures are even worse, with an estimated 90% of disabled children out of school according to UNICEF.

When the Committee visited Kenya as part of the education inquiry, we were hugely impressed by the Girls Education Challenge project in Kisumu, which is run by Leonard Cheshire Disability. Through such programmes and its disability framework, the Department for International Development is making good progress, but it needs to ensure that the framework is implemented across all DFID’s education programmes. After what we saw in Kisumu, the Committee reflected, on a cross-party basis, that we want more of those sorts of programmes to be funded, because it felt like the very best of UK aid reaching those who are often the most left behind, and the best value for money for UK taxpayers.

The Department should use its influence to shine a light on the needs of disabled children, just as it has done very successfully with regard to education for girls and young women. As we believe this area is vital, we recently launched an inquiry into DFID’s broader work on disability. If we are to reach the most marginalised, it is vital that we do more to encourage developing countries to invest in education. Last year, the Department committed £225 million to the Global Partnership for Education. That is a very welcome UK commitment, though it was seen in Kisumu, the Committee reflected, on a cross-party basis, that civil society organisations had been calling for.

The GPE takes an approach that deserves great respect and commendation. It says that before it will work with a poorer country, it wants a commitment from that country’s Government to increasing the amount they spend on education, ideally to 20% of the budget. That is a challenging figure for many countries, but it means that the support that comes from the multilateral organisation triggers further domestic resource mobilisation through taxes in the country concerned. Four in five of the countries that GPE partners have maintained their education budget at or above a fifth of public expenditure, or increased their education budget in 2016—the most recent year for which we have figures. Some 41 million additional girls enrolled in school across the partner countries between 2002 and 2016.

To give just one example, Niger in Africa was one of the first countries to join the Global Partnership for Education in 2002. It has increased its spending on education from 5% of public spending to 22%, despite an extraordinary backdrop of political instability, recurrent drought and conflict. In 2009 only 40% of children in that country completed primary school, but eight years later the figure had increased to 73%, showing remarkable progress in one of the poorest countries in the world. The International Development Committee has called on the Government to use their influence with partner countries to secure greater domestic spending on education, and I want to repeat that call today.

I will finish by saying something else about the way in which we can raise the money needed. As various colleagues have said, aid on its own will not resolve the matter. The scale of the challenge is such that even if all the wealthy countries of the world matched our 0.7% commitment on aid and prioritised education, as I wish they would, it would not provide the money that is needed. Alongside increased aid, we need to look at other mechanisms that mobilise resources for education. The international finance facility for education, which has been promoted by former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, was first recommended three years ago. It has been given support in principle by the British Government as well as the United Nations, the World Bank and regional development banks. The aim is to multiply donor resources and motivate countries to increase their own investments. I genuinely believe that the facility, once up and running, has the potential to help deliver better-quality education to millions of the most marginalised children. It aims to raise at least $10 billion of additional finance to help meet global goal 4 and thus—to remind ourselves—guarantee that by 2030 every child has access to quality primary and secondary education, and, crucially, quality pre-school learning.

We know from all the evidence that early investment in education makes the largest difference to life chances. I know that the Secretary of State has offered her support in principle to the finance facility, I hope we will hear soon that the British Government are able to match that principled support with financial support.

One of the central aims of the global goals adopted almost four years ago is to leave no one behind. If we are to achieve that goal in education, it will require the sustainable increase in finance that I have described, but also a relentless focus on access, on the most marginalised and on quality, to which Members in this debate have rightly given priority. There is a worrying trend: despite a lot of progress since the millennium development goals were adopted almost two decades ago, education outcomes among the most marginalised have stagnated in many countries. In some cases, they have even declined, particularly in countries affected by conflict and with resulting displacement. It is incumbent on our country, the UK and the wider international community to step up our efforts to deliver on the pledge to leave no one behind in education.

I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Glasgow East and the hon. Member for David Linden on securing this important debate. I apologise, Mr Hollobone,
for not being here on time; I was at the Backbench Business Committee asking for a debate that I will hopefully secure in the near future. The issue is of particular importance to me. I want to put on the record my thanks to the Minister for the commitment and passion that she has shown in her role. We understand that we will get a positive response from her, and I look forward to that. I also very much look forward to the contribution from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill).

My constituents—indeed, all our constituents—have been involved in the Send My Friend to School campaign. I remember taking the petitions, and the massive piece of cardboard that they were put on, to No. 10 Downing Street to hand it over to Prime Minister David Cameron. That was great for the kids back home in the schools, because it meant that what they were doing in the primary schools in my constituency was being heard by the Prime Minister and the Government at the highest level. It was really good news.

Hon. Members know that in my role as chair of the all-party group for international freedom of religion or belief, I have campaigned for many years on behalf of those who are persecuted for their faith, and indeed those who are persecuted for having no faith at all. The groups are often some of the most marginalised communities in the world. One of the most important ways in which they are marginalised is through the denial of their right to education. I was reading about Send My Friend to School. Particularly young girls have been penalised, unfortunately, and children experience unfair treatment for reasons including having a disability—a point to which the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) referred—being a girl in a place where gender discrimination is rife; living in a rural area; experiencing poverty; and being caught up in an emergency. The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) referred to Nigeria. I pray for the young girl, Leah Sharibu, who was kidnapped by Boko Haram almost two years ago and has still not been released because she is a Christian, whereas all the others were released. I am conscious of that as well.

I want to speak about three things: the state of education discrimination against religious or belief minorities; the benefits of tackling such discrimination; and what the UK Government can do to address that unjust discrimination. Last year, Christian Solidarity Worldwide produced its excellent “Faith and a Future” report, which examined the state of education discrimination against religious or belief minorities in countries around the world. It found that children and young people from marginalised religious or belief communities are often significantly discriminated against in many different ways when it comes to education.

In September last year, along with colleagues from this House and the House of Lords, I visited Pakistan, where children from minority faith communities are regularly subjected to psychological and physical abuse by fellow students and even teachers. We were able to talk to some of those who suffered discrimination because of their religious beliefs in Pakistan. I am pleased to see that Dr Shoaib Suddle has been appointed to his role; I tabled an early-day motion on that subject. Hopefully he will be able to address some of the issues of minority religious, sex and ethnic groups in Pakistan.

In Burma, non-Buddhist children from Chin State are placed in Government-run Buddhist monastic schools, where they are prohibited from practising their faith and are forcibly converted. In Iran, Baha’i children and young people find their access to education at all levels actively denied by state law policies. I have spoken numerous times about the Baha’is. I grieve for them, because when it comes to education in Iran, they are directly discriminated against.

CSW’s report highlights how intolerance in education systems is often facilitated by school curricula and textbooks, which, at their worst, stigmatisate and incite violence towards religious or belief minorities, and at their best simply omit those groups from curricula entirely to paint a picture of countries that have only one religion or belief. There is no country in the world that I am aware of that has only one religion or belief among its constituents, its people, its nation. Such intolerance often leads to violence, both in schools and wider society. Just last week, I heard the heartbreaking story of a young Pakistani boy who was stabbed with a machete by his schoolmates simply for the crime of being Christian. In Pakistan, I met a young lady who has a doctorate, but who was in one of the Christian slums, giving children the rudiments of an education, to give them a chance to better themselves.

DFID has clearly invested large amounts of money in Pakistan, which is a country close to my heart—as many countries are; but I have always had a soft spot for Pakistan, although last year was my first time visiting it. DFID has invested almost £680 million in education in Pakistan, including £122.7 million in 2017-18. I am not sure whether the Minister will be able to respond, but I would certainly like to be reassured that the money is going to people of different religions and to ethnic minorities. It is important that that be on the record.

Is it any wonder that some turn to violence or extremism when they are repeatedly told, from an early age, that certain people are bad and do not even deserve to come to the same school? What message do we expect children to learn if we turn a blind eye to bullying, deny certain belief groups access to education, ignore their contribution to society—they clearly have a contribution to make—and at every level suggest that they are inferior, wicked or unworthy? How can we hope for societies free of the scourge of extremism and violence when school textbooks preach hate against certain communities? That is why tackling educational discrimination against religious or belief communities is so important.

That leads me to my second point. In the long term, if we want to reduce conflict and build cohesive communities that are resilient against violence and extremism, both in the UK and around the world, we must invest in education systems that celebrate diversity and encourage mutual respect. I thank the Library for its comprehensive and detailed background briefing for the debate, which contains many helpful comments. It quotes a speech that seems to me the key to the debate, or its core:

“People—children—are not broken just by the wave that submerges the life vest or the convoy that does not make it to the besieged town. They are broken by the absence of hope—the soul-crushing certainty that there is nothing ahead for which to plan or prepare, not even a place in school.”
Today’s debate is about giving them hope and opportunity.

“What holds them back is not just their location, their homelessness, and their poverty—but the death of their dreams. The only way to reach the Sustainable Development Goal of every child at school is for a child’s real passport to the future stamped in the classroom—and not at a border check post.”

That is the key to what we are trying to achieve.

Apart from the obvious benefits of tackling educational discrimination against marginalised religious or belief communities, the other principal benefit for Governments is the economic growth that can come from giving whole communities the skills and knowledge to participate in the workforce. In 2012, a UNESCO report found that for every $1 spent on increasing education, as much as $10 or $15 could be generated in economic growth. That is the sort of considerable return on an investment that we all wish for—a 1,000% or 1,500% return. It is also a considerable investment in young people and the education that we want them to have.

Another speech quoted in the Library briefing states that “your education stays with you. It defines your future path, whatever start you may have got in life. Wherever you go in the world—this is a universal truth.”

It mentions Malala, the young girl who was shot in the head in Pakistan:

“Remember what Malala told the UN after being shot in the head for going to school: ‘The terrorists are afraid of books and pens. The power of education frightens them.’”

That is another reason for pushing education and giving everyone who really wants it the opportunity to have it.

I want to finish within the timescale you asked for, Mr Hollobone, and to set out five things that can be done to tackle educational discrimination. First, DFID can invest more resources in training programmes for teachers around the world that will teach them how to promote tolerance and respect in the classroom. We can all probably identify a teacher or teachers who had a significant impact on our lives. I am no different; I can do so quickly. There were a number of my teachers who promoted tolerance and respect in the classroom, and we need to do that. That focus is my No. 1 point.

Secondly, the UK could work with Governments to develop school curriculums that promote respect for others and include the contribution of minorities. How greatly that is needed! I automatically think of the example of Pakistan, because of my visit last year; the Government there sets aside 5% of jobs for religious minorities and ethnic groups, but if a person does not have the educational achievement, they cannot get one of those 5% of jobs, and will end up doing the most menial of jobs. Let us give those people the opportunity for educational attainment, so that they can achieve and get jobs. There are jobs, including jobs for nurses, but training is needed if people are to get those jobs and move forward.

The UK can show its commitment to the endeavour by doing the same in UK schools. The Government could take the lead by ensuring that the contribution of minorities—such as the Commonwealth soldiers from India and elsewhere, who fought and died for the United Kingdom in the great wars—is recognised in the British school curriculum. DFID could make funding available to non-governmental organisations that provide education to those in marginalised religious and belief communities, seeking them out and helping them to achieve that remarkable goal.

The last of my suggestions is that the UK could encourage countries such as Pakistan to commit to temporary measures to address educational discrimination, such as having quotas for people from religious or belief minorities in educational institutions. We want members of Christian and other religious minorities, and ethnic minorities, to get the chance to be teachers in schools. Would not that be a wonderful opportunity? What an achievement it would be if some of the people DFID encouraged could do that for children around the world.

3.27 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for securing this important and timely debate and for his insightful reflections on his time in Tanzania, which obviously proved incredibly fruitful. They were an education for all of us in the Chamber, and for those who are watching the debate. It has been a pleasure to hear all the speeches this afternoon, which have put the highest value on education. I am reading a speech that I have written, and many people in the world will never have the opportunity to do such a thing. It goes without saying that I and my colleagues, and the Clerks and anyone else working here, would not be here without the essential education that has been provided. Another thing that goes without saying is that education is a human right—and not only that: quality education should be a human right for all.

Without doubt, education can be the most valuable tool in the fight against global poverty. Public health, skilled workforces, economic prosperity, civil society and peace all benefit from sustained development of global education. Yet some of the world’s most vulnerable people have no access to education, which leaves millions of children locked out of learning altogether, because of humanitarian crises across the world.

It was nice to hear Members reflect on their time in local schools. I was at Camperdown Primary School two or three weeks ago, and a programme was being run there on what it is to be a global leader. Homelessness, peace in the world and prosperity were highlighted as priorities, but everyone prioritised education. Those were P5 to P7 children, so I am looking forward to sending my speech to them after the debate—because it is for people in my own communities that I am speaking, as well as those around the world who have no education.

The UNHCR has reported that “over the past two decades, the global population of forcibly displaced people has grown substantially from just under 34 million in 1997 to 68.5 million in 2019.”

In other words, in 30 years it has more than doubled and, indeed, is more than the entire population of the UK. That trend is set only to increase with the continuing impact of climate change. Astonishingly, those people include more than 25 million refugees, more than half of whom are under the age of 18, and refugee children are five times more likely to be out of school than their non-refugee peers. In the Central African Republic, for example, half a million children are out of school, and in Afghanistan, 3.7 million children—more than 2 million
Last year, the UK increased its support for global education, health, or infrastructure. Remained much lower than aid allocated, for example, to education since 2011, the report noted a clear decline in the proportion of international aid being spent on education. Not on advancing the UK's foreign policy goals. Development spending must be focused on this many times in the Chamber, and I cannot emphasise it enough: development spending must be focused on conflict enough. The Rohingya are in Bangladesh because of the most awful crimes in Burma that were akin to genocide, and because a lack of education in Burma resulted in the targeting of ethnic minorities, including the Rohingya—another reason why education is fundamental for all. The story is the same in conflict and post-conflict zones around the world. The Education Cannot Wait fund has estimated that 75 million children worldwide have had their education disrupted because of conflict in the last decade alone.

As we heard, in 2017, the International Development Committee, on which I sit, published a report on the Department's work on education, highlighting the global learning crisis. It recommended that DFID increase its share of UK aid for global education and give the full amount requested—$500 million—to the Global Partnership for Education. The report went on to state that the groups most likely to be left out of education are the most vulnerable—the very poorest, girls, disabled children, and those affected by conflict and emergencies. To be sure of fulfilling the UK Government's commitment to the sustainable development goals, DFID must now focus on those groups and ensure that no one is left behind.

Aid spending has been in the press over the past couple of weeks, and we should be mindful of that issue—indeed, I was glad to hear the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) mention the importance of that 70p in every £100. I have been deeply concerned over the past couple of weeks to hear the former Foreign Secretary call for a change in the Department's purpose from poverty reduction, to furthering "the nation's overall strategic goals". Last weekend, we learned that private letters have been sent to the Chancellor by a number of international development organisations and charities, warning that UK aid is being diverted from the poorest countries to promote commercial and political interests. I have said this many times in the Chamber, and I cannot emphasise it enough: development spending must be focused on helping the poorest and most vulnerable, and on alleviating global poverty, not on advancing the UK’s foreign policy goals.

It is particularly concerning that a recent UNESCO report noted a clear decline in the proportion of international aid being spent on education since 2011, and stated that levels of international aid for education remain much lower than aid allocated, for example, to government and civil society, health, or infrastructure. Last year, the UK increased its support for global education funding in developing countries by 50% to £75 million per year. That is undoubtedly welcome, but to put it into perspective, last year schools in the UK spent more than £75 million just on advertising for new staff. If the UK Government are serious about helping children to access education, they must commit to increase funding, and ensure that it reaches the most vulnerable people. Will the Minister confirm whether her Department will review and increase the UK’s commitment to the Education Cannot Wait fund this year?

The SNP is clear: aid spending must contribute to sustainable development and the fight against poverty, injustice and inequality, and there are few better ways to do that than by funding education for the world’s most vulnerable people. If we are to establish lasting peace in regions of the world that are scarred by conflict, education must be the foundation on which that is built. DFID is recognised as a global leader in promoting education in developing countries, and I urge the Minister to consider the needs of the most marginalised children and young people across the world and to put money—as recommended in the Committee’s report—into championing those needs. I want to go home to my constituency and say to the young children I met just a few weeks ago that this country is truly delivering on education and global leadership.
from formal education, and what impact emergencies and conflict situations have on access to education, especially in countries such as the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which may not garner as much international attention or resource mobilisation. Each group deserves to be recognised, and the specific nature of their educational needs addressed.

The World Bank’s “World Development Report 2018” declared an international learning crisis. Across the world, some 260 million children are not enrolled in primary or secondary school, and many of those who are do not receive the quality of education that they need to equip them with the skills required to thrive in adulthood. The report from the Send My Friend to School coalition presents a series of practical suggestions about ways to provide quality education for all.

Hon. Members have rightly raised issues and concerns about the vast number of young people who are not getting the education they deserve. Researchers at the University of Cambridge found that girls living in poverty in Pakistan and Nigeria spend an average of just one year in school, and in India, Mozambique, Cameroon and Sierra Leone they spend just two years. That figure is even more shocking when compared with wealthy urban boys in those countries who receive between 10 and 12 years of education. Limited educational opportunities for girls are not only a human rights issue, as girls are unable to realise their right to education, but cost countries trillions of dollars in lost lifetime productivity and earnings.

Last year, Save the Children revealed that we are not on track to meet Sustainable Development Goal 4.1, which seeks to ensure that all girls and boys “complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes.”

Does the Minister acknowledge that warning? With 85% of children in low-income countries having no access to pre-primary education, what does she make of the chances of reaching target 4.2, and does she think we will meet the global goal of education for all?

I appreciate that the Government have acknowledged there is a problem with marginalisation and inequality, particularly for women and girls, but unfortunately they have not always undertaken projects that will reach the most marginalised. Analysis carried out in 2016 by the Independent Commission for Aid Impact into DFID’s support for marginalised girls stated:

“DFID does not have a coherent strategy for addressing girls’ marginalisation in education, and that its various activities are not well joined up.”

ICAI went on to say that it had identified a clear pattern of DFID programmes losing their focus on marginalised girls through the implementation process, leading to disappointing results.”

The Government have had almost three years to act on those disappointing findings. Will the Minister explain how the Government have addressed those concerns, and what work they will undertake to ensure that all girls receive the education that they need?

I would particularly welcome the Minister’s response to those points, given that a more recent evaluation of DFID’s partnerships with the private sector under the girls’ education challenge—the so-called strategic partnership windows—found that those projects undertaken in partnership with the private sector “had little or no impact on literacy and numeracy outcomes of the marginalised girls that they reached.”

The evaluation also found:

“Projects focused on marginalised regions, not always on the most marginalised girls.”

Most peculiarly for projects designed to reach marginalised girls, they actually reached more boys than girls.

The Opposition recognise that the main way to address inequality and access to quality education is to build strong public services. I welcome the fact that the vast majority of DFID education funding goes to public education, but I am concerned about the minority of UK aid that supports for-profit private education because, as I have just mentioned, we know that such models cannot reach the most marginalised children.

On the matter of UK aid being used to support commercial education companies, I am deeply concerned that during January’s education world forum the Minister reportedly met with the Ugandan Minister of Education to discuss expanding private British education centres in Uganda. Will she guarantee that DFID’s work on education will always prioritise the children who need access to education, and that she will not seek to use the aid budget to further the commercial interests of UK companies?

With regard to global education, the UK rightly seeks to be a global player. To do that effectively we must remain open to learning from others. The European Parliament recently passed a strong resolution in relation to its aid spending on education. Among other things, it concurs with the recommendation in the report that we are discussing today that we should ensure that education aid is free from commercial interests, that we do not support for-profit providers, and that education is free and universally available at the point of use by reaffirming a commitment not to use official development assistance to support private, commercial educational establishments. Does the Minister agree with that recommendation?

I congratulate the human rights experts who drafted and adopted the Abidjan principles on the right to education two weeks ago in Ivory Coast. The principles recognise that free, quality education is a universal right, and that the role of private actors in education must be regulated to ensure that they do not undermine that right. When the final document is published in March, will the Minister agree to look at it and act on advice on the rules and regulations necessary to ensure that private schools do not negatively affect the right of everyone to access a free, quality public education? Will she also encourage all states where DFID operates to ensure that all UK programmes, policies and projects support public education systems, which are the most effective way to advance equity?

3.42 pm

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing this important debate. I also congratulate the Send My Friend to School campaign, which has successfully engaged so many children, particularly in primary schools, on the importance of education around the world, and the work that we do.
My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) spoke about 70p for every £100. I think £100 is probably too much money for most primary school children to relate to, so when I go into primary schools I use the example of whether, if they had £10 in pocket money, 7p would seem too much or too little to spend on overseas development assistance. I am always encouraged by the support shown for it by young people.

I am proud to have been a member of the Government that enshrined the 0.7% commitment into statute, and I am proud that all the major political parties in this country stood at the last election on platforms of continuing to respect that commitment. The support shown for it by young people gives me great confidence that the primary school children of today will continue to endorse it when they become voters.

I highlight one of the excellent programmes that we run from the Department for International Development—the Connecting Classrooms initiative. Not all hon. Members may have yet had the opportunity to promote that in their primary schools. I do not know whether Mount Vernon Primary School or Northgate Primary School have thought about applying to be Connecting Classrooms schools, but in my constituency, for example, Great Malvern Primary School and 10 other primary schools in the Malvern area have a very vibrant link that has lasted for a decade with schools in Tanzania. I know how much the young people and teachers in both countries have benefited from those links, so I draw hon. Members’ attention to that.

In his excellent opening speech, the hon. Member for Glasgow East highlighted the importance of education for girls, children with disabilities and refugee children. I will highlight the work that the UK Government do on that. The only area of political dissent, in a remarkable debate which saw an outbreak of consensus, was on whether private investment in education around the world should be allowed. As Members pointed out, the UK itself is not currently using any of our overseas development assistance with Bridge schools, although 5% of the education support that we give does go to schools where private capital is involved. CDC, which is our private sector investment arm, does have an investment in Bridge schools—an investment that creates a return that can then be further used to expand education.

I am not in the same ideological camp as Opposition Members: I am much more open-minded. We need to focus on 12 years of quality education for all. That should be the objective. I was inclined to support what the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) said regarding the fact that all the development budgets of all the countries in the world will not be enough for us to address the learning gap that Members have rightly highlighted. Therefore, why should we be ideological and draw the line at other providers coming in and providing support?

Jim Shannon: In my constituency of Strangford, Elim Missions is a very active church group that helps in Swaziland and Zimbabwe. Many other churches do similar educational projects outside of what DFID does. We all know of such examples from constituencies—the Minister probably knows of some from her own. We should put on record our thanks to those church groups and faith groups for all that they do.

Harriet Baldwin: The people of the United Kingdom are remarkably generous, and I am always struck by the range of different ways in which people help to support this agenda, independently of what we are doing in DFID. I pay tribute to all that work, and highlight the small charities fund within DFID, from which people can apply for funding for their projects. Opportunities are also given by aid match. Mention was made earlier of child soldiers in the Central African Republic. We were able to aid match War Child’s project; for every £1 raised by the British public, we matched that with £1. That is just one example of how we can draw on the generosity of the British people.

I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Henley as trade envoy to Nigeria. He mentioned Boko Haram. It is worth reminding ourselves that the very words “boko haram” effectively mean “western education is a sin”, loosely translated. It is so important to recognise the power of education in combating those dangerous terrorist movements. Colleagues also highlighted the importance of teacher education in delivering 12 years of quality education.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby asked about the International Finance Facility. As he well knows, we support that principle. We support anything that is successful in bringing more funding into this important agenda. We are doing more technical design work, and then we will set out the UK’s position as far as that is concerned.

I say to the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), that we should all acknowledge that we are not on track in terms of meeting Sustainable Development Goals 4.1 and 4.2 by 2030. The world has not done enough to address that, so I welcome Members’ support for the work we do and encouragement for us to do even more.

I was saddened that the hon. Lady mentioned the ICAI report dating back to 2016. She will be aware that we have subsequently published a very clear and welcome education strategy paper, and that we have made further announcements about funding to address girls’ education.

On my bilateral meeting with the Ugandan Education Minister during the Education World Forum, I do not recall the specific point the hon. Lady mentioned, but I remember telling the Minister how much I had enjoyed visiting a school run by Promoting Equality in African Schools in Kampala this year. I believe that may be a privately funded provider. It is outstanding, so I reiterate on the record my support for the excellent education I saw being delivered.

We heard resounding support for the UK’s campaign for 12 years of quality education. We are absolutely committed to driving a step change in the global response to the learning crisis that colleagues rightly highlighted, and we match our commitment with resources. In fact, I hope colleagues report back to the schools in their constituencies that the UK provides more than 10% of all global education funding through overseas development assistance. We work bilaterally in 23 countries and multilaterally in 66 further countries. I am immensely proud—I hope colleagues report this back, too—that between 2015 and 2017 the UK supported 7.1 million children to gain a decent education, of whom at least 3.3 million were girls.

In fighting marginalisation, our first priority is to close the gender gap, which a number of colleagues mentioned. We use our position on the world stage to
shine a spotlight on the needs of the most marginalised and their right to a basic education. In the past year, we have joined forces with international partners at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting; at the G7 in Canada, where the Prime Minister announced further funding to help girls’ education; and of course at the United Nations last September. I can commit to all those hon. Members who asked that we will continue to look to such forums to lead the campaign on 12 years of quality education.

DFID’s published education policy prioritises three things: better teaching, identifying and backing system reforms that will deliver better results, and, above all, targeting the most marginalised children, who are at risk of being left behind. We heard staggering figures on the learning gap, and people highlighted the particular challenges for children with disabilities and those who never attend school. Children in conflict-affected countries are a third less likely to complete primary school, and girls in sub-Saharan Africa are nearly 25% more likely than boys to be out of school.

Educating girls is one of the best buys in development spending, because one extra year of primary schooling for girls can increase their future wages by 10% to 20%. We know, too, that educating girls is the bedrock of healthier and more peaceful societies. The UK is therefore committed to supporting girls to access a quality education. Last year was a landmark year for girls’ education. DFID, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for Education all got behind the Government’s girls’ education campaign, Leave No Girl Behind. Our flagship girls’ education challenge supports up to 1.5 million girls to access education and acquire know-how for their life and work. Many of the initiatives that form part of that provision will help girls who do not attend school because of menstruation, and will combine with other work we do to ensure access to water and sanitation. In the coming months, that challenge will reach 250,000 highly marginalised girls who have never attended school or have dropped out due to poverty, motherhood, disability or conflict, and, importantly, give them a second chance to learn.

Colleagues mentioned children with disabilities. We held a summit last year to tackle that important issue. I do not have time to draw out the progress that has been made as a result of that summit, but I assure colleagues that Governments in Rwanda, Zimbabwe and elsewhere have stepped up their provision and their commitment to giving children access.

Colleagues also mentioned children who are suffering through conflict and crisis in places where education can be the difference between a future of exploitation and squandered potential, and one of hope. Education can give children the tools to rebuild their lives and, eventually, their countries. School provides children with stability in a conflict environment. That is why we are proud to be a founder of, and one of the largest contributors to, Education Cannot Wait, which reached more than 650,000 children last year and built more than 1,000 classrooms. We are reviewing and renewing our funding for education in emergencies. Our objective is to get displaced and refugee children into classrooms faster, and to put short-term international funding on a much longer term footing.

We also fund the Global Partnership for Education. We will fully support 880,000 children in schools for each of the three years covered by our pledge. Some 450,000 of those children will be in fragile and conflict-affected states. Whether it is in Syria, in Lebanon or in other conflict-affected areas, we are doing what we can. We also announced our endorsement of the safe schools declaration, which underlines our political support for the protection of schools and the children in them. We will step up our work in the Sahel; Niger was mentioned, and I also highlight the work we are planning to do in Chad.

Let me conclude by again congratulating the hon. Member for Glasgow East on securing the debate. I hope a large degree of consensus was reached. We are committed to continuing this important work.
Environment Agency Permits

3.58 pm

Mr Sam Gyimah (East Surrey) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered Environment Agency permits.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

I count myself very lucky to be the Member of Parliament for East Surrey, an area characterised by beautiful rolling countryside and vibrant towns and villages, all within easy reach of London. The north of my constituency even falls within the M25, although, with all the green space, people would be forgiven for not realising it. East Surrey is the epitome of what makes England unique. We know how fortunate we are, and we take very seriously our duty as custodians and protectors of our stunning local environment for future generations. I called for the debate because I am concerned about our ability to protect the environment for our children and grandchildren, but I am hopeful that is something that can easily be rectified by the very able Minister.

If hon. Members indulge me, I will tell them about the constituency case that has prompted the debate. Oxted quarry, regulated by the Environment Agency, has been problematic for a number of years. My predecessor, Peter Ainsworth, was doing battle with the side-effects of the quarry as far back as 2005, if not before. The leader of Tandridge District Council, Martin Fisher, who is in the Gallery, has also been doing battle with the issue for several years, on behalf of residents.

The quarry has two functions: chalk extraction and waste infill. However, the problems for the local environment stem from the volume of heavy goods vehicles that end up on East Surrey’s country roads, because a working quarry needs to transport its materials. We have long had issues with HGVs thundering through small villages and along narrow lanes, causing distress to residents and costly damage to the highways. I am sure colleagues in rural constituencies and my Surrey neighbours will recognise that.

The latest chapter in the story of Oxted quarry began in 2005, when the Environment Agency granted permission for the operator to infill the quarry with 100,000 tonnes of inert material a year. That was in addition to the 18,000 tonnes of chalk that has been extracted annually since the 1930s. Why was that a problem? Before the licence was granted, only four or five HGVs made return trips each day, which was some 10 movements. After the licence was granted, there was a dramatic increase in HGV movements: local authority records show that at their peak, in 2008, an average weekday saw 150 HGV movements. On six days, there were in excess of 216 HGV movements, which meant roughly one vehicle every three minutes.

To put this in context, the access road to the quarry that HGVs must use is a narrow category C lane, known as Chalkpit Lane. I am sure that hon. Members can picture what kind of road it is. North of the quarry is a steep hill with an HGV restriction, which is often breached. The correct route in and out of the quarry passes rows of cottages with no footpaths and pavements, and goes under a railway bridge and through a residential area with mainly grass verges. At some points, it is nearly impossible for an HGV and another vehicle to pass each other when travelling in different directions. It is not a road that can withstand such huge volumes of HGV traffic. It is damaging to the road itself, but more importantly it is hugely dangerous to residents and pedestrians, some of whom use the lane to get to local schools.

Fast forward through a time of some respite in the area, when the quarry paused operations, to 2016, when the operator sought permission to double its infill to 200,000 tonnes per year and the Environment Agency was asked to make a further decision. Permission was granted, which caused distress locally. The decision set in motion a two-year battle between Surrey County Council as the mineral planning authority, the quarry operator and local district councillors, led by Martin Fisher, to ensure that strong limits were placed on vehicle movements and to stop the narrow, country Chalkpit Lane becoming akin to an HGV highway.

When discussions began, the operator wanted the limit to be set as high as 200 movements a day. They had a licence for 200,000 tonnes of infill, which needs a lot of lorries. After discussions with the operator—and while facing the threat of legal action for potential loss of revenue should restrictions be brought in—Surrey County Council officers recommended a limit of 156 movements. Fortunately, due in large part to my hard work and that of local councillors, the limit settled on by the Surrey County Council planning committee was much lower, at 112 movements. I thank Tandridge District councillors, led by Martin Fisher, for their hard work. The limit was an improvement and the best we could have hoped for in the circumstances, but ultimately Surrey County Council should not have been in the position of making this decision.

I have talked a lot about roads and mentioned the Environment Agency briefly, but I am sure the Minister is wondering why I called a debate on Environment Agency permits. I hope the Minister will agree that the reason why HGV movements had to increase, and why Surrey County Council was put in a position where it had to allow over 100 movements on a narrow country lane not designed for lorries, is because the permit was granted. The Environment Agency’s procedures meant it had no reason not to grant the permit. It was not just Surrey County Council that had its hands tied, but also the Environment Agency, whose representatives informed me at a meeting that legislation restricts them to considering whether only the site itself and the environment on the site can cope with the permit arrangements.

Oxted quarry can cope with 200,000 tonnes of infill—I have no doubt that it is big enough—but the wider environment of Chalkpit Lane and Oxted itself most certainly cannot cope. As I understand it, the Environment Agency has no statutory obligation to consult local authorities or even to consider the wider environmental implications outside the site. It is also unable to add conditions to the permit relating to areas that are the responsibility of other public bodies. In this instance, it cannot add vehicle movement conditions as they are the responsibility of the local authority.

I recognise that the Environment Agency and county planning authorities have different responsibilities, but I believe there must be stronger co-ordination to ensure that projects that are given the go-ahead are consented to with a full, rounded view of the impact, and not in the current disjointed and piecemeal way.
The current approach has meant that Surrey County Council has faced a long battle with the operators, who believe—rightly or wrongly—that they have a right to infill 200,000 tonnes. The local authority was faced with an extremely difficult choice: should it bow to pressure from the operator, cover itself against potential legal action but put residents at risk, or should it do what was in the best interests of residents and run the risk of costly legal procedures, which would have an impact on how much money it would have to spend on the local area?

I called for the debate because it is obvious that there is a gap and mismatch in the legislation, which is causing wider problems. It is one of those cases where things fall between the cracks. I know that the Minister is capable and imaginative, and that the Government can do something about this, which will make a big difference across the country, not just in my constituency. Will the Minister commit to looking at the issue, so that the Environment Agency’s permit procedures are changed, to ensure that local authorities can have a greater say before permits are issued or varied? I appreciate that that might require primary legislation, which could prove difficult in the current climate, but anything that can be done in the interim would be welcomed by residents.

The Environment Agency does a great job in protecting our environment, and does everything it can to ensure that businesses can function in rural communities in a way that protects them from harm. Unfortunately, legislation means that it cannot protect the wider environment around the sites it controls. I hope the Minister will agree that simply joining up procedure and closing cracks would bring enormous benefit to rural areas and ensure that entire communities can be protected for future generations.

4.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah) on securing this debate. I must admit that when I saw him sitting on the other side of the Chamber I was worried that he had perhaps left the party, but I am delighted that he is certainly has not. I am sure he will understand that people may be twitchy at the moment.

Mr Gyimah: I would like to assure the Minister that I am not feeling at all Tiggerish.

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend certainly has the courage of a lion in championing his constituents; I am sure they will be pleased that he is bringing forward this important matter in debate. We have corresponded previously on this topic, and I appreciate his frustration, but this debate clearly reflects the importance of ensuring we have clear and strong pollution and planning controls that work for environment, for people and for business.

As the Minister responsible for environmental permitting, I would like to clarify the purpose of the permitting framework, and the Environment Agency’s role in relation to permitted sites. It is important to say at the outset that permitting is entirely distinct from planning matters which, as he will be aware, fall to the planning authority, but it is important that all parties involved in consideration of these matters work together openly and transparently at a local level to achieve the best outcome for all.

The development of the environmental permitting framework was designed to make regulation simpler, more straightforward and more proportionate to the risk that it regulates. The objectives of the framework have been to make environmental permitting clearer for businesses while maintaining the same level of environmental protection. Before the framework was introduced, permitting and compliance systems developed largely in isolation and had, often for good reasons at the time, adopted various approaches to controlling different types of polluting activity, even where activities were undertaken on the same site, leading to duplication of regulatory control.

Under the environmental permitting regime, regulation of activities is more straightforward for business and regulators to use and apply. It allows the consolidation of different permits and delivers a streamlined approach to applications, guidance, and inspections. Environmental permits allow for flexibility and prescribing the environmental outcome, but not the way it is to be achieved; for example, a permit might require the operator to ensure that the site is sufficiently secured rather than setting a specific fence height. By cutting unnecessary red tape but continuing to provide protection of the environment and human health, that approach has been largely successful.

Environmental permits are issued for regulated activities carried out at sites. In the case of a permitted landfill facility such as that located at Oxted quarry in Surrey, a permit covers hazards and risks arising from the activities on the site of the landfill itself. Landfill involves the disposal of waste to land, so those risks include waste reception and quarantine, leachate and landfill gas containment and collection, wheel-washing, litter collection and various other operations on site.

It is the case that environmental permits specifically apply to what happens within the boundary of a site, while other matters such as traffic outside the site fall under wider planning controls. That distinction is important to avoid regulatory duplication; it is not the right thing to have two regulators making decisions over the same issue and therefore coming up with potentially different outcomes.

My hon. Friend will be aware that the county council is responsible for the relevant planning controls because it is both the minerals planning and waste planning authority. The council’s stated aim in those roles is to minimise adverse impacts of minerals and waste-related development on local communities and the environment. As he has pointed out, Surrey County Council has restricted vehicle movements in and out of the Oxted quarry site to no more than an average of 76 daily HGV movements, or 38 in and 38 out, but I am conscious that there is also a maximum capping.

Mr Gyimah: I understand the Minister’s point about seeking to avoid regulatory duplication. The challenge we have is that we want not to duplicate regulation, but to have a more rounded view of the regulatory process. As it happens, it looks as if one arm does not know what the other arm is doing, and it does not take into
account all the factors, particularly the impact those factors have on residents. To the extent that any success was achieved in our campaign, it was more through sheer force of will than through the regulatory system working effectively.

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend will be aware that there has been a permit in place for the activities at the quarry since 1980. Following an assessment in December 2016, the agency granted a variation, as he has pointed out, to increase the annual quantity for waste from 100,000 to 200,000 tonnes per year. That application was done legally; I think it is fair to say that the variation was lawfully granted and I also think it is accurate to say that the agency has not received any complaints from members of the public about the performance of the site since operations were scaled up in 2016.

When evaluating an application for a permit variation, the EA is required to consider any negative impacts that may result from managing waste within the boundary of the site. Other impacts outside the boundary of the site must be controlled through the planning process. Being transparent and open matters, but just as my hon. Friend cited the challenges a council might face as to why it would not make a decision on traffic movements, I am sure he will accept that the Environment Agency can be challenged on not making a variation to the permit if the environmental impact is not deemed to be negative. Since the scaling up of operations, there have been no complaints about the operation of the site, although I am conscious that the movements are causing concern to people.

The agency has visited the quarry site on a number of occasions in the past year to assess compliance with the permit. Compliance has generally been good, and where the agency has identified minor non-compliances they have been addressed by the operator. I am conscious that on one occasion there was evidence of mud and soil being tracked out of the site by exiting lorries which the company did not clean up as quickly as it should have; it stated that its road sweeper had broken down.

I am also conscious that at the time of processing the variation of the permit, the Environment Agency did not carry out a wider consultation with the local community. I recognise that if it had been aware of concerns or complaints, that is something that it could have done at the time. My hon. Friend will be aware that the Environment Agency has since committed to consulting more widely than is statutorily required for any future mineral extraction applications in Surrey, but it is important to make clear that the agency can only consider matters raised through consultation that are within its regulatory remit. In the case of the Oxted quarry landfill site it regulates the disposal of waste and requires that Southern Gravel comply with its environmental permit, but it does not have the power to regulate the impacts of HGV movements.

The Environment Agency and local planning authorities each have clear, strong and distinct roles with regard to pollution and planning control. The necessary distinctions in regulatory role and remit can lead to practical issues on the ground. I fully understand that the mindset of local residents and my hon. Friend, who is their MP, is that the increase in permitted tonnage allowed at the Oxted site is inseparable from the increase in HGVs.

Our published guidance makes it clear that where a regulated facility requires a permit and planning permission, the operator should make both applications in parallel wherever possible. That helps the operator, the planning authority and the Environment Agency to join up where that is of benefit to all concerned. The same principle of joined-up regulation should apply to significant permit variations, and I have asked the agency to ensure that it discusses that with local authorities in relation to sites of possible high public interest.

That should be a matter of good practice, which picks up links between planning and permitting responsibilities where they arise. Locally, the Environment Agency has said that it will continue to work with Surrey County Council and applicants to consider the twin tracking of planning and permitting applications where appropriate. That is sensible local co-ordination that can be established on a case-by-case basis, without the need for additional legislative controls.

I am conscious that what I have said today will not necessarily satisfy my hon. Friend. He will recognise that legislation that adds further regulatory barriers to the progress of business is not something that this Government instinctively support. However, I hope that his example shows that the Environment Agency has listened carefully and is trying to work with local authorities, particularly in Surrey, to learn lessons from this. I commend the council for being strict on the number of movements allowed per day. I am confident that both the county council and, as I have demonstrated, the Environment Agency are undertaking their enforcement actions accordingly. This is an important way for central Government and local government to work together.

Question put and agreed to.

4.20 pm

Sitting suspended.
Former British Child Migrants: Payment Scheme

4.30 pm

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the former British child migrants payment scheme.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, on this very important issue. This is not the first time that we have debated the issue in this place, and I am very pleased to say that since the last time that we had a debate on it, the Minister has managed to get the Government to move, for which we are extremely grateful. Former child migrants across the world have contacted me in the last few months to talk about how grateful they are for that movement. However, there are outstanding concerns and worries, and as the Minister knows, many of the people affected are getting older and so time is of the essence.

It is almost a year since the report by the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse—IICSA—shone a damning spotlight on the severe sexual, physical and emotional abuse experienced by many of the thousands of child migrants sent abroad unaccompanied as a result of the policy of child migration practised by successive post-war Governments. The report exposes the harrowing abuse that took place before the children travelled, during the journey and after they migrated. It often continued for years and took place at the hands of more than one perpetrator. For some children, the most devastating aspect of the experience was being lied to about their family background and even about whether their parents and siblings were alive or dead.

The experience that many of the former child migrants had has had a lifelong impact on their physical and mental wellbeing, their educational attainment and their future employment prospects. The child migration programmes effectively ended some people’s lives just as they were beginning. Over the last few months, I have also been contacted by many of the partners and children of former child migrants to talk about the impact that there has been on them, too. This is not just about children losing their parents and parents losing their children; it is about generations being separated—grandparents being separated from grandchildren and young people growing up and not knowing any family beyond their parents at all.

While acknowledging the failures of the institutions, including charities and churches, that were involved in the process of migrating children, the report, as the Minister knows, overwhelmingly concluded that Her Majesty’s Government were primarily to blame for the existence of the programmes after the second world war and that successive British Governments, of all political persuasions, allowed them to remain in place despite a catalogue of evidence showing the treatment that children were receiving. That is surely one of the most shameful periods in British history.

However, things went silent until well into the 1980s, when Dr Margaret Humphreys and the Child Migrants Trust sought to bring the matter to public attention. The policy position maintained throughout the 1990s and 2000s was that the Government may have been aware of allegations of physical and sexual abuse, but that any such allegations would be a matter for the Australian authorities, as former Prime Minister John Major put it. It was not until 2010—it was nine years ago to the day on Sunday—that then Prime Minister Gordon Brown publicly apologised to former child migrants on behalf of Her Majesty's Government and established the family restoration fund, which was endowed with £6 million to help former child migrants to reunite with their families in Britain.

Despite that scheme, IICSA found last year that the UK Government had failed to provide adequate redress to the more than 2,000 surviving former child migrants and it recommended that financial redress be established without delay, with payments beginning within 12 months; the relevant date is 1 March 2019. The report recommended an equal award for each applicant, on the basis that they were all exposed to equal risk of abuse. Given the age and ill health of surviving former child migrants, it stated that action was urgently needed. However, it took the Government almost 10 months to publish a formal response to the recommendations. During that time, 36 former child migrants died, meaning that they would never see the justice that they so badly deserved or the redress that they were owed.

When the Government did publish their response, they accepted the recommendations on financial redress, for which we are extremely grateful, and confirmed that they would establish a scheme to ensure that each surviving former child migrant receives an ex gratia payment as soon as possible. It was also very welcome that the Government acknowledged that the delay in establishing the scheme had had a major impact, and stated at the time that they would accept claims in respect of any former child migrant who was alive on 1 March 2018, when IICSA's report was published.

I was alerted to the fact that the scheme had happened by the Minister’s office. I was alerted to the fact that the details of the ex gratia payment scheme had been published via the Child Migrants Trust. The details appeared on its website on 31 January 2019. It was stated that each eligible former British child migrant would receive £20,000 and that the Child Migrants Trust would support applicants in establishing their identity as former British child migrants. I understood that payments would then be administered by the NHS Business Services Authority.

I have a number of questions for the Minister, which I sent to her in advance; I hope that that will help her to answer them today. They are not my questions, but questions that have been raised with me by the many former child migrants who survive around the world. As the Minister can imagine, they were delighted when details of the scheme were published, but that delight quickly turned to anxiety because many of the details are not currently in the public domain.

First, many former child migrants are very concerned about the lack of involvement that they have had in the Government’s response to IICSA and the development of the payment scheme. I do understand that the Minister was alive to the possibility that some of the former child migrants needed to see justice and see it quickly, but it would be very helpful if she could tell us what consultation has happened with former child migrants. The president of the International Association of Former Child Migrants...
and their Families wrote to the Home Secretary on 10 January to voice concerns that there had been no consultation with survivors of the programmes and to request a meeting regarding the Government’s response, but to date no response has been received to that letter.

This Minister will be aware, because I have raised it many times in the House, including with the Prime Minister, that there has been confusion about which Department was responsible for this issue in the past. That has been one of the problems that the former child migrants have had. It seems to me that those people who have spent decades feeling and being ignored by the British Government are entitled to a speedy response from their Government now, when they are seeking answers towards the end of their lives. I would be grateful if the Minister would acknowledge those concerns and agree to meet representatives of the international association of child migrants and the Child Migrants Trust to discuss these issues further.

I have also been asked to raise concerns about the payment amount. It is unclear how the figure of £20,000 was reached. IICSA’s report stated that any financial redress scheme should make a “real, immediate and lasting difference to the lives of the former child migrants.”

Without any consultation, can the Minister be confident that the £20,000 amount lives up to that recommendation? Could she tell us how it was arrived at? By comparison, the average payment issued to claimants under the recently established Australian scheme, which is open to former British child migrants, is the equivalent of £43,000, with a cap at £82,000.

The Government did respond to a question that I tabled on the methodology that was used and stated that the methodology was based on the Northern Ireland historical institutional abuse inquiry, which in 2018 had recommended the amount of £20,000 for former child migrants sent from Northern Ireland. However, I have been unable to find any information from the Northern Ireland Executive about what methodology was used and how this figure was calculated, so I would be very grateful if the Minister could explain how the amount was arrived at.

I would also be grateful for some clarity about the tax arrangements, because there is little detail on the Child Migrants Trust website and the Child Migrants Trust is unclear about the process. Will the payment be taxable in the UK or in any other country where the claimants live and will receive payment? After all this time, and many broken promises, there is not a great deal of trust out there—there is a huge amount of anxiety. At the very least, the former child migrants who have suffered appallingly at the hands of successive Governments are entitled to know from this Government what they will actually receive and whether the payment will affect any other benefits that they are receiving.

On the application process, I am aware from my work with the Child Migrants Trust that it has excellent contacts throughout the child migrant community and an established track record in dealing with child migrants for eligibility for the use of its services and for redress schemes in other countries. I can well understand why the Government were keen to ensure that it took a central role in the process, but I am concerned about whether it has the capacity to administer the new scheme, particularly in the timescale set out by IICSA, which would give it only a few days to process the applications.

There is also concern about the Child Migrants Trust’s ongoing capacity issues. As I understand, it has not been offered any additional resources to deal with the increased workload. It has already received hundreds of inquiries about the scheme and, with an estimated 2,000 potential claimants, it is important that it has the resources to handle claims in an efficient, thorough and sensitive way to ensure that the people who are eligible for the payment actually get it.

Given that the payment scheme is likely to introduce new former child migrants to the work of the Child Migrants Trust, it is anticipated that there will be an increase in demand for its other services, such as the family restoration fund and counselling. Will the Minister look at the trust’s long-term funding to make sure that it can do what the Government have asked it to do and continue to provide vital ongoing services to former child migrants?

There are concerns about the eligibility criteria. I have been contacted by several individuals who were migrated with a family member or guardian present on their journey and who may not be eligible under the scheme. The Government have stated that “children who went overseas with their parents or guardians, or were sent overseas” with apparent permission from “their parents or guardians, are clearly in a different category: they were not the responsibility of local authorities or Government organisations in the United Kingdom and their parents or guardians made the arrangements voluntarily.”

Several people have contacted me to say that they disagree with that position. They say that from the early 1960s, some child migrant schemes arranged for children to be accompanied on the journey by migrating parents before being taken into a child migrant institution. Once in an institution, they were treated in exactly the same way as other children and exposed to the same risk of physical, sexual and psychological abuse as every other child.

Others have pointed out that excluding those “sent overseas by their parents or guardians” could be problematic. They tell me that after 1946, the British Government required all British child migrants to have the signed approval of their parents or guardian before they could be sent. IICSA heard evidence of some cases where carers illegally signed those approvals, but the authorisations were overwhelmingly signed by parents or guardians. By signing their approval for children to go, are the parents now deemed to have effectively authorised them to be sent and if so, will those children be ineligible for payment?

There is an urgent need for clarity and detail about the eligibility criteria for the scheme to ensure that the maximum amount of people put at risk by the programmes can receive the payment. Those who are deemed ineligible are entitled to a clear and sensitive explanation for that decision.

I am concerned about the way that the payment scheme was announced and the amount of promotion that has taken place. As I understand, the details of the scheme were announced solely in the form of a note
published on the Child Migrants Trust website. There was no oral or written statement to outline the details of the scheme to Parliament and there was no press release from the Department of Health and Social Care, despite the scheme potentially costing a significant amount of public money. The details of the scheme are still not published on the Department’s website or on gov.uk.

It seems that the job of raising awareness of the scheme has fallen completely on the shoulders of the Child Migrants Trust, which is doing an excellent job of using its networks to promote the scheme, despite no extra resources having been committed to help it. In answer to a question that I asked about the establishment of a communications strategy, the Government indicated that they had publicised the scheme through the high commissions of receiving countries. Can the Minister provide further details about that work and what it hopes to achieve? Can the Minister also tell us what the Government’s future communication strategy will be?

The future funding of the Child Migrants Trust and the family restoration fund is a key concern. The Minister will be familiar with the work of the family restoration fund and its life-changing impact. It has been funded by successive Governments, including this one, and it continues to make a real difference. Since it was established in 2010, it has facilitated 1,248 visits. The IICSA report states clearly that

“the establishment of the Redress Scheme should not be used as a reason for reducing funding for the Child Migrants Trust or the Family Restoration Fund”;

In the Government’s response to the report, they seemed to agree and recognised

“that the Family Restoration Fund continues to provide a valuable service.”

However, they also stated that they

“will continue the Fund until the end of the scheme, by which time the Fund will have provided over £8 million to support reunions, over more than a decade.”

When I asked about future funding for the family restoration fund, I was told that it was a matter for the upcoming spending review, which has caused real concern that it will cease to exist after its funding ends later this year. The Minister previously extended funding in 2014 and 2017. The fund should not end until there is no further demand. In fact, the findings of the IICSA report underline how vital all the services provided for former child migrants are. It would be unfair if child migrants applying for the payment scheme in 2019 could also apply for restoration fund support but those applying afterwards could not benefit from that service.

The Minister and I have had public and private conversations about the raw emotional impact of the scheme on child migrants. I am grateful to her for listening to our concerns about the timing of the announcement that compensation would be made and for making sure that no bad news was delivered just before Christmas when many people are struggling to cope.

The Minister will be aware, however, that even such a positive announcement can open up some difficult emotions for people who are dealing with it, which might bring them into contact with services for the first time. This may be the moment when, after a lifetime apart from their families, people think that they need and wish to seek support as they come to the end. A clear commitment from the Minister that the money provided for the redress scheme will not be used as an excuse not to fund the family restoration fund, and a longer term commitment to the fund, would be extremely welcome.

All over the world, people are watching this debate who were taken from their families at the beginning of their lives. They have had to fight all the way to survive and for justice. There have been many moments in their lives when we collectively, as a country, have fallen well short of what they deserved from us by kicking the issue into the long grass and denying them the justice and support that they were entitled to. That has caused them severe harm, but they are still there—fighting and campaigning. As we bring this shameful chapter in British history to a close, the least that we can do is issue them with the payment, the clarity and the support that they deserve.

4.49 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

First of all, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) for securing this debate, for her excellent contribution to it and, of course, for her campaigning on this issue over many years. We have seen today her continuing tenacity, and the importance of continuing to raise these vital matters on behalf of the victims. She described the inquiry report as damning, and said that it exposed harrowing abuse and that this issue was exacerbated by the lies that were told about it. She is right that this was a shameful episode for our country.

My hon. Friend was also right that the issue went beyond the abuse that people suffered; they were also wrongly separated from their families for generations. Think about what it would mean for someone to be separated from their parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. It is very difficult to appreciate just what kind of hole that would leave in their life, and it is also very difficult to appreciate just how harmful that is. I add my voice to hers, and would like to show my appreciation of the courage of those who have been affected by the child migration programme: the 130,000-plus British children who were deported without their consent—sometimes, as we know, even without their parents’ consent—and the estimated 4,000 unaccompanied child migrants who, as we have heard, experienced sexual, physical and emotional abuse as a result of this devastating policy, which was practised by successive post-war Governments until 1974.

As was highlighted by the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse report on the child migration programme, and in the accounts that we have heard today and in previous debates, these children suffered abuse before, during and after their migration, often over a period of many years and sometimes at the hands of more than one perpetrator. As we know, for many of them, that has had a lasting—indeed, lifelong—impact on their physical and mental wellbeing, their educational attainment and their employment prospects—in effect, their whole life. No one can fail to be moved by the personal accounts that we have all heard from those who suffered abuse, and I am sure that we are all united in our desire to do everything we can to put right those wrongs, as far as it is possible to do so.
[Justin Madders]

There is no doubt that the victims of the child migration programme suffered for too long at the hands of successive Governments, and that successive Governments chose to turn a blind eye. Of course, these people also had to wait far too long for an apology. It saddens me that that took until 2010, when Gordon Brown, the then Prime Minister, formally acknowledged that successive Governments had failed in their duty of care.

Gordon Brown also established the £6 billion family restoration fund to help former child migrants to reunite with their families, so that they could build relationships, be involved in significant family events, or even urgently visit relatives at times of crisis. However, as we have heard from last year’s inquiry, despite this scheme, the UK Government have failed to provide adequate redress to the more than 2,000 surviving child migrants.

I am sure we all agree that victims have been let down all their lives by successive Governments missing opportunities to take action over the years. It is with regret that we note that it took more than nine months for the Government to respond to the inquiry report, especially given that the inquiry stressed the importance of urgent action because of the age and ill health of some of the surviving child migrants.

I welcome the Government’s acknowledgement that the delay in establishing the scheme was unacceptable, and that they will accept claims on behalf of former child migrants who were alive when the report was published last March but subsequently passed away. The report recommended that financial redress be established without delay, and that payments be made within 12 months. As we know, that would be by this Friday, 1 March. I share the frustration felt by my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan about the details of the ex gratia payment scheme having been published only on 31 January, and only on the Child Migrants Trust website. As she acknowledged, although the trust has excellent contacts throughout the former child migrant community, we need to learn from the Government whether there are any further things that they can do to publicise the scheme, to ensure that nobody is overlooked.

I share my hon. Friend’s concern that former British child migrants have raised legitimate points about their lack of involvement in the development of the payment scheme. In any case of abuse, it is absolutely vital that the victims’ voices be heard. In this case, they were not heard at the time of the abuse and they have not been heard since; it is important that they are heard throughout the whole inquiry process, which includes the determination of the payment to be made.

I hope that the Minister will say whether she is confident that the £20,000 figure will provide adequate redress. As my hon. Friend said, so far there has been little clarity about how that figure was arrived at. People absolutely need transparency at all times, not least when they have suffered in the way that we have heard about today.

My hon. Friend also asked reasonable questions about the taxable status of these payments, and so on. I hope that the Minister can respond to those questions, so that former child migrants do not suffer any more uncertainty about whether they will qualify for the scheme. I hope that he will also provide clarity about the eligibility criteria, as my hon. Friend requested, because there were child migrants who were sent to the receiving institutions with permission from parents or guardians, but as my hon. Friend clearly set out, no matter the vehicle by which children arrived at those institutions, the abuse that they suffered within them was the same. We hope that there will be no further delay to victims of the child migration programme receiving the redress they are entitled to. Will the Minister say whether she is confident that the Child Migrants Trust has the resources to administer the scheme? If it does not, what further measures will be put in place?

I share my hon. Friend’s concerns that the Government’s pledge to continue the family restoration fund until the end of the redress scheme does not meet the inquiry report’s expectation that the continuation of the scheme will not lead to reduced funding for the Child Migrants Trust or the family restoration fund. I hope that the Minister will take this opportunity to provide reassurance that the Government will continue to provide funding until the family restoration fund is no longer needed.

In conclusion, as a politician, it angers me to hear the inquiry’s conclusion that the main reason for the failure of Her Majesty’s Government to take action to end the child migration programme after the second world war—despite the evidence of ill treatment and abuse, including sexual abuse—was politics. I hope that in today’s politics we are a very long way away from that place—a place where the importance of continuing relations with other Governments and with charitable organisations, and the need to avoid reputational risk, was prioritised over the wellbeing of our children. The politicians of today may have our differences, but we must never again allow the suffering of children and their search for justice to be subservient to the politics of the day.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Unusually, due to important parliamentary business elsewhere, we will have the Opposition spokespeople in a different order. We have heard from Her Majesty’s official Opposition; now we will hear from Stuart C. McDonald for the Scottish National party.

4.57 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Thanks very much, Mr Hollobone, for calling me to speak. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, and I genuinely thank you for offering me the opportunity to speak very briefly.

Clearly, it will be difficult for me to sum up a debate that I have only heard a tiny fraction of, but I congratulate the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) on securing it. She secured a similar debate something like seven or eight months ago. She has done Parliament a favour by drawing attention to this issue; most importantly, of course, in doing so, she has helped the survivors of the horrible child migration programmes. I thank her for bringing this issue to Parliament once again.

As well as the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse, which we discussed last time, there is the inquiry established by the Northern Ireland Executive and chaired by Sir Anthony Hart, who has also reported in detail on the child migration programmes, and the Scottish child abuse inquiry under Lady Smith, which is ongoing. As was well discussed and well established in our previous
debate, even if they are looked at by the standards of the time, these programmes were appallingly ill-conceived, and the actions and supervision of those involved fell drastically short of the standards that were expected. Concerns about the programmes were ignored, and little effort was made to ensure that the children being “exported”, to use that horrible term, were safe.

The conclusions of the IICSA report were stark: successive Governments had failed to respond properly to concerns that were raised, and the programmes were allowed by successive British Governments to remain in place, despite a catalogue of evidence showing that children were suffering ill treatment and abuse, including sexual abuse. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), talked about some of the reasons why these programmes were allowed to continue, including politics, which chimed with what we discussed last time.

After the Ross report in 1956, nothing was done. It is stomach-churning to read the IICSA report’s conclusion that that was because of the patronage of persons of influence and position. It is clear that in some cases, the avoidance of embarrassment and reputational risk was more important than the institutional responsibilities towards migrated children. That is a truly damning indictment of successive Governments.

Both the Northern Ireland and the IICSA reports recommended compensation payments for those who had been sent abroad under the child migration programmes over and above any compensation for other wrongs and abuses suffered. The Government’s announcement of the compensation is very welcome indeed, and it is only fair to reflect on the fact that it has been welcomed by groups working on behalf of survivors, including the Child Migrants Trust and the International Association of Former Child Migrants and their Families, and also by former child migrants themselves, who have given evidence to the inquiry.

It is important to hear more from the Government. A statement would have been ideal. We need to know much more about the detail. How has the compensation been calculated? What is the timing? How are folk to apply? Will the Government continue to work with all the groups to ensure that the compensation scheme operates smoothly and reaches as many survivors as possible? After the Windrush scandal, there have been welcome announcements about compensation and redress, but the proof is always in the pudding, and there have already been trials and tribulations in getting that up and running. We do not want that repeated here.

I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say. I apologise once again for not having been able to play a full part in the debate, and I again thank the hon. Member for Wigan for securing it.

5.1 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): I would normally start by saying that it is a pleasure to engage in the debate, but to be honest this has not been the most comfortable of subjects on which to speak on behalf of the Government. As we have heard, this was a shameful episode in our history, and all the more shaming that it was under successive Governments of different colours. I think everyone in the room would wish to dissociate themselves from that kind of behaviour.

However, I congratulate the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) on bringing the matter to my attention, again. She has been my conscience on this. Quite rightly, because, as she mentioned, we had the recommendation almost a year ago and it took time to get cross-Government agreement on how to take it forward. Having got that agreement, it was my desire that we make progress with the implementation but, by definition, that has left a number of questions unanswered. I hope that some of the points I make today will answer some of those outstanding questions and settle any anxiety that the child migrants have. Ultimately, they have not been dealt the best cards over the years and it is important that we do our very best to redress the situation. I pledge to continue to do my best in that regard.

The hon. Lady rightly highlighted that there was confusion about who owned the policy, and that is one reason it has taken so long. This all came about because of the child abuse inquiry, which sits under the Home Office, but historically the Department of Health has had responsibility for child migrants generally, and that led to the confusion. I really hope that we can settle the matter more formally, so that we can have more certainty for the child migrants. While I am in this place, the hon. Lady can rest assured that she can always nag me if things go awry, and history tells me that she will. All power to her elbow for doing that, because it is important that we do this right.

Once we had made the decision to make the payments, it was important to make the announcement quickly, not least because some of the individuals are elderly—I am advised that the eldest is 102. Speed is of the essence, to ensure that everyone can get some enjoyment from the payments.

The hon. Lady has once again demonstrated her commitment to ensuring that the welfare of those children is not forgotten; we should never forget what was done in our name. The policy was misguided and wrong, and has caused suffering and distress. The conclusion of the child abuse inquiry was that payment should be made not because people were exposed to abuse—compensation exists for that—but because of the very fact that organisations of the state sent the children away without consent. It is in that spirit that we have adopted the recommendation, recognising that organisations of the state exposed the children to harm, regardless of whether any harm materialised. As a consequence, we have taken the opportunity to announce the payments.

All Members have made very fair points about how the scheme has been communicated. That came about, again, because of the speed with which we wanted to make the announcement. It is also worth noting that the Child Migrants Trust has extremely good relationships with the affected people, so although it was not bells and whistles, we were, in a way, using the right channels to get to those who needed to know. However, we will reflect on what has been said and consider whether and how best to disseminate more information, recognising that not all those affected are necessarily in contact with the trust and it might be a pleasant surprise for them to know about the scheme.

As I mentioned, the payments are on the basis of being exposed to risk; they are not compensation for abuse. We have announced that each former child migrant will receive £20,000 in recognition of that exposure. It is only fair that, in recognition of the passage of time
[Jackie Doyle-Price]

since the recommendation, we backdate the payments to 1 March 2018. As the hon. Lady mentioned, a number of the individuals have passed away since that date, and we will honour any claim made in respect of a deceased migrant.

Lisa Nandy: The wider communication of the policy is important precisely because of that group of people who have passed away. I imagine that their relatives would be much less likely to look at the Child Migrants Trust website and much more likely to look at gov.uk or the Department of Health and Social Care’s site. If the Minister would at least consider putting something on the Government’s website, that would be helpful.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I will take that point away. Part of me thinks that it will be appropriate to do that once we have all the details written down; none the less, I will reflect on what the hon. Lady says, because she is right. The very act of making the payments is in itself an acknowledgement that the Government have failed their own citizens. If individuals are no longer here to enjoy the benefits of the payments, they would have wanted their families to do so, and we need to make every effort to ensure that they can.

As I have said, this is not compensation; it is a payment for the fact that the individuals were deported by organisations of the state and were put at risk of harm. There are other routes to compensation for migrants who suffered harm or injury and this payment is in addition to and does not interfere with that; it does not affect the rights of any individual to pursue avenues of compensation. The scheme provides for an equal award for every applicant, regardless of income. Essentially, we want to make it simple, and to get the payments out to those affected.

Setting the amount was difficult, because it is impossible to put a figure on the costs, the damage and the harm; in that sense, it is difficult to come up with any calculation. But we have engaged with the Child Migrants Trust, which many migrants trust to represent their views, and have consulted it on the design of the scheme. We did not want to go through a formal consultation process for exactly the reasons we have discussed: we wanted to act promptly and in a way that would get the money out as soon as possible. In setting the sum at £20,000, we have taken note of the recommendation of Sir Anthony Hart’s report into institutional abuse in Northern Ireland.

He recommended that the payment should be a sum sufficient to recognise the injustice that young children suffered through being sent to a far-away land and losing their sense of identity as a result. He recommended the figure of £20,000, and on that basis, we considered it to be an appropriate figure for a UK-wide scheme. Again, it is important that we do not have any discrimination between the four nations; it is right that we deliver this scheme in a way that is consistent across them.

Lisa Nandy: It would be helpful to those child migrants if we could get some clarity about why Sir Anthony Hart came up with that amount. The aim is not necessarily to question that amount, but if we are seeking to put a figure on the level of harm and dispossession that was caused, those child migrants would appreciate—and indeed are entitled to—an explanation of how the amount was arrived at. If the Minister’s office could help us find out how that figure was arrived at in Northern Ireland, that would help many of those child migrants to put together an important piece of the puzzle.

Jackie Doyle-Price: That is a fair challenge. With the caveat that any figure would not be adequate to compensate for harm, some methodology about why that figure was arrived at would be helpful.

The issue of eligibility has been raised on a number of occasions. The only condition that needs to be met is that a claimant is a former British child migrant sent from the United Kingdom and Crown dependencies before 1971, meaning anyone who was below school leaving age and was sent by a church, state, voluntary or other organisation to one of the receiving countries: Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Zimbabwe, formerly Rhodesia. However—to answer one of the hon. Lady’s questions—they must not have been accompanied by an adult family member or guardian, sent by an adult family member or guardian, or sent to live with a member of their birth family, because this payment is rooted in the fact that these were people who were sent by organisations of the state. I recognise the point made by various hon. Members that those sent by family members may also have been exposed to abuse, but again, the scheme does not alter those people’s routes for seeking compensation in other ways. This scheme is the Government taking responsibility for decisions made in their name, rather than for those made by families.

We have kept the eligibility criteria as simple as possible, to make the process of claiming the payment as simple as possible. Those eligibility criteria are the same as those being used for the family restoration fund, and are the same criteria that the Child Migrants Trust has used over many decades to determine who can access its services. Clearly, we want to make the application process as simple as possible, and as the hon. Lady has mentioned, we have asked the Child Migrants Trust to act as the first point of contact for child migrants who wish to apply for payments. I have heard the hon. Lady’s points about resource: we are in close contact with the Child Migrants Trust and give it support as appropriate. I hope, given the extensive network of contacts that the trust has, that this work should not prove massively onerous; in fact, in some respects, it may be helpful to the trust’s wider work.

Lisa Nandy: It would be helpful to the Child Migrants Trust if the Minister were to agree to a further meeting with the trust to discuss some of those outstanding concerns. I would be grateful for an assurance that she will do that.

Jackie Doyle-Price: We will of course continue to engage with the Child Migrants Trust, especially given that we want to be sure that in rolling out this scheme, we are getting to as many people as possible and doing it as efficiently as possible. I do not think anyone is better placed to advise us than the Child Migrants Trust.

The trust will reach out to all those who it has supported in the past to help them to apply for the payment. I know that it has already promoted the
scheme widely, and it has also contacted all of the known sending agencies—those organisations that were responsible for sending children. We are aware that there has been extensive coverage in the Australian media, but we will look at where there is a need for further active communication, and how best to do that. We expect the high commissions in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Zimbabwe to have extensive contact programmes, making sure that they are using their networks to make people aware of the scheme. Those former child migrants who have not previously been supported by the Child Migrants Trust will need to go through a separate application process, but the trust has given undertakings that it will help those people to do so. We have evidence that a number of child migrants who were not previously in contact with the trust have made contact, which is an indication that the message is going out. We have put some details of the scheme on the Government’s website, but I will make sure that we keep that website properly updated so that it is signposting people to where they can access help.

The hon. Member for Wigan is right that although the Child Migrants Trust will accept applications, the actual application payments will be made by the NHS Business Services Authority. The aim is to make those payments within 60 days, but more quickly if at all possible: we are determined to get these funds to those who should benefit from them as quickly as possible. Some reference was made to tax and benefit issues, and I am clear that every one of those beneficiaries should receive that £20,000 in its entirety, free of tax and separate from benefits, but that is not entirely in our gift. We are having conversations with overseas Governments about that issue, and we will also look at what needs to be done for those who are resident here so that they are not adversely affected.

Again, part and parcel of having made an announcement very quickly and then trying to get a scheme going is that we do not have firm answers on all of these subjects. I assure the hon. Lady that I am determined to do right by this group of people. In doing so, she has made my life uncomfortable from time to time, but I thank her for it, because that is what this place is all about. We will make sure that we deliver as we have promised.

5.18 pm

Lisa Nandy: I am very grateful to the Minister for that comprehensive response and for taking so many interventions. I am grateful to all the Members who have spoken in the debate. I have given her a hard time over the past year or so, and she has taken it on the chin and responded. It was she who came to this place and said that it was incredibly difficult to get things through Government with everything going on with Brexit. I have seen that for myself—we have all seen it—and I know she has fought hard to get us here. I thank her on the record for that and for her ongoing commitment to try to resolve the outstanding issues.

There was one issue about the family restoration fund that I might write to the Minister about to try to get some more clarity, given the uncertainty about the ongoing nature of that scheme. I was glad to hear about the level of urgency within Government to try to resolve some of the issues and the ongoing commitment to meet and work with the Child Migrants Trust as we move forward. I suspect that this debate will not be the last time she hears from me on this subject.

I am reminded by the Minister’s closing remarks that far too many people do not have a voice. I hope that those who have been watching today—the people affected and the families of those who are sadly no longer with us—will feel that at least they have had a voice today because of the efforts of some of us here in this room. I hope we have reassured them that they will continue to have a voice going forward. The independent inquiry into child sexual abuse was established by the Prime Minister, the then Home Secretary, to learn the lessons from the past and ensure that such things never happen again. It seems to me that that cannot be done without seeking to right some of those historic injustices. We have made a small step forward to keeping children safe in the future here today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the former British child migrants payment scheme.

5.20 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Eating Disorders Awareness Week

9.30 am

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Eating Disorders Awareness week.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey, for this very important debate. As we are in the middle of Eating Disorders Awareness Week, this is a timely day on which to remind ourselves of the good work that has been achieved in the past year, but also to look forward to where we want to be by this time next year.

I want to take this opportunity to thank Beat—the Eating Disorders Association—and the many other charities that have been in touch with me ahead of the debate for their sheer hard work and determination to keep this issue at the forefront of the Government agenda. I see many of you in the Public Gallery and want to say thank you for all that you do.

There is always great cross-party support in debates on eating disorders. I have been in this place for only 18 months, but it is the debates in which we are all travelling in the same direction that are so powerful, because we show our constituents that we can agree, and when we do, this place is much stronger and improves lives much more quickly.

As we know, eating disorders affect more than 1.25 million people throughout the United Kingdom, but that is a conservative figure, because many sufferers have not yet been diagnosed or identified. It is for that reason that this debate is opportune. We are all here today for those in the Gallery, for those who are fighting for this cause, for those who are currently fighting this debilitating disease, for those who have fought and come through it and for those who are currently living their daily lives as normal but may suffer at some point in the future. My colleagues and I will always fight your corner, and I am delighted to see many hon. Members here today to support the debate.

I wish to begin with the topic of stigma, which is the focus of the Eating Disorders Awareness Week campaign this year. As we know, eating disorders affect all age groups, genders and backgrounds. An eating disorder is not a diet gone wrong, a fad or a phase. It is not caused simply by a young female being exposed frequently to magazine images of skinny models or going on online platforms with similar material and deciding that they wish to look the same. It is an illness so deep rooted in social isolationism. Before they know it, the candle is being consumed or not enough exercise is being done—praise when they miss a meal or hear the sound of a rumbling stomach. That voice inside a sufferer will not and cannot go away.

The loved ones around a sufferer see their daughter, son or friend fade into a shadow of their former self; they are helpless in every way. Parents struggle and are in emotional turmoil. They know that if their daughter falls and skims her knee, they can bathe it, put a plaster on it and make it better. If their son is upset because he is struggling at school, they can get him the support that he needs. We have solutions, and it is human nature to want to fix and help those we love. However, when it comes to eating disorders, everyone is helpless and feels hopeless. No one, unless they are trained, can provide support, other than the individual themselves. Many, if not all, sufferers who have managed to recover will say that it was the hardest journey that they have ever taken, but having spoken to some of Beat’s bravest ambassadors, we have seen at first hand the amazing, inspiring individuals they can become—but that is only if we help them.

As a result of the stigma attached to eating disorders, black, Asian and ethnic minority people, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and people from less affluent backgrounds are less likely to seek and get medical support. Research developed ahead of today’s debate showed that four in 10 people believe that eating...
disorders were more prevalent in white people than in other ethnicities, yet research shows that they are just as common or more common in the BAME community. Thirty per cent. thought eating disorders were more likely to affect the more affluent; in fact, they evolve at the same rate irrespective of education or income. Sixty per cent. of respondents believed that they affected only young people. That is having a significant impact on adults coming forward for support, and we see men and boys not being referred as soon as girls and females.

The statistics might not be surprising, but we have to challenge them continually. They are preventing certain groups in society from appealing for help, and creating an inequality in support. As a result, people are more ill by the time they are referred, making the recovery process much more difficult and sometimes impossible. We have seen fantastic work by members of the royal family as well as other notable figures, who have raised awareness of mental health disorders and who seek to break down the barriers to people speaking out, but also recognise that it is okay to talk and okay for someone to say that they need help.

When sufferers reach out for help, they have often been suffering for years. They need urgent specialist help immediately. The average cycle of relapse and recovery lasts six years, and there must be constant efforts to reduce that. To undo months and years of torture, specialists need time and resources to allow a patient to open up, to analyse, to find out the root causes, to get under the skin of the issues and to develop the mind to fundamentally change—a long-term approach, but a life-changing one.

Families, too, need guidance and support on how to deal with this troubling time. Many do not know where to go for support. This was one comment from the social media campaign that I ran before the debate:

“When anorexia arrives in a family it is like throwing a grenade into a home and watching it explode...caring for my daughter has impacted on the mental health of all those in my family.”

That is why I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) that family-based therapy would provide a much-needed support base throughout the recovery process.

Without the investment of time, those patients will be back in our GP surgeries and hospitals time and again. We must look beyond weight. This is an issue of the mind, so whether it is a case of referral or recovery, it cannot be determined by the number on the scales. As a result of the digital campaign that I ran, I heard from many people up and down the country, and I thank them for coming forward with their stories. One person, who wished to remain anonymous, said that “my granddaughter never got so thin but she died nearly 7 years ago at the age of 19 and I feel that if there had been some positive help she would have been alive today.”

She had been disregarded simply because her weight was not low enough. Recent research shows that GPs do not have adequate training for supporting individuals who have an eating disorder, with three in 10 sufferers not being referred when required.

Rachael Maskell: The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech. I am troubled by the fact that, a year on, services in York are still completely inadequate. On Friday, I spoke to GPs who are trying to manage many individuals with eating disorders. They have been instructed to take patients’ blood, to monitor the electrolytes, and to weigh them frequently, without the psychological support and clinical competencies that are necessary. Is it not absolutely essential that GPs receive the training that they need, so that we can put in place the holistic services that patients need?

Kirstene Hair: The hon. Lady is absolutely correct. I will come on to speak about that in detail. I hope the Minister will give further detail on how she is approaching that with other Departments.

In any five-year medical degree at UK medical schools the average amount of training in eating disorders was 1.8 hours, and one in five gave no training at all. The concern is not confined to one part of the United Kingdom; it is a widespread issue across all nations. That seems absolutely extraordinary, given that this is one of the most fatal mental health disorders, affecting 1.25 million people. GPs must be able to tell the difference between a healthy exercise routine and a compulsive one, low body-mass index and lack of nutrition, and going through a diet phase and the beginning of an eating disorder. They must recognise the clear indicators and how eating disorders manifest in order to deliver the right treatment plan, but to do that they need training.

I would like to see further encouragement of self-referrals and more work with schools, where many members of staff may be able to identify unusual behaviour. I warmly welcome the approach taken by my secondary school, Brechin High School, which has appointed a member of staff to lead on mental health who has a support base within the school and is linked up with the local primary schools, so that at the end of primary school, when an eating disorder—or any mental health disorder—may begin to develop, that support is monitored and continued as pupils enter secondary school and progress their education. I am keen to hear from the Minister how the training aspect can be addressed. I would like to hear from the Scottish National party spokesperson how the Scottish Government could do more to include training within university tuition, and how they will address the role that schools can play in early intervention.

When help is needed, how long do we have to wait? Waiting time targets have been a focal part of the campaigns run by many charities for years. In England and Wales, by 2021, 95% of eating disorder referrals for those under-19 are due to reach a specialist within four weeks, and within one week for urgent cases. Will the Minister confirm that the Government are on track to deliver that target, which is already making a huge impact? Along with the charities, I warmly welcome the ambition shown by this Government.

This is not a political debate and I do not wish to make it one. However, once again, when I wrote to the Scottish Minister for Mental Health about that, and I look forward to her response, the UK Government have stepped up to treat under-19s. I encourage work so that those targets continue to be
ambitious. We know that the sooner patients are seen, the higher the chance of recovery and the lower the long-term cost to the NHS. The current 18-week target in mandating simply has to be addressed. When sufferers determine they need help, their illness is more likely to be treatable, but by the time they may be seen, the likely outcome is much more negative and potentially fatal. I want my constituents to have the same opportunity for early intervention as people south of the border. I want the Scottish Government urgently to address this needless inequality.

As we know, those with an eating disorder often take up to three years to identify that they have such a disorder. Sufferers must do two things: realise something is wrong and wish to make themselves better. When a sufferer comes forward, given their scepticism about all those trying to help them, we have a moral responsibility to grasp their ask for help and support them as a matter of urgency. That requires step-by-step help, to nurture these fragile but wonderful people and not let any of them fall out of the system.

I want to conclude with a point about social media, which is a force for good in many ways, but a stain on the life of many families, which recognise it as the tool that tore them apart. All age groups regularly browse online to determine what everyone else is up to or to catch up on the news, but they normally see only positive news. I have not seen one Instagram image of anyone in this room getting up in the morning, doing mundane things, such as washing the dishes, or having a bad day at work, because we submit only positive images. However, if we also put out negative images, things might feel slightly more normal. Social media is a platform for showcasing the positive aspect of our lives, with the balance of the negative aspect that we encounter every day. For someone with an eating disorder, or any mental health disorder, that only accentuates their problems. Recent cases have made us all stop and think. There is so much pro-ana and pro-mia material promoting a harmful mindset, which forms or heightens an eating disorder. We must not forget that this material is often put up by sufferers themselves, so we must push supportive materials towards those who promote such images and material.

I do not believe that that is above any of the social media companies. The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport made a hugely positive step forward in that respect earlier this month. Will the Minister explain the conversations that her Department has had with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport? Social media platforms cannot take all the responsibility for showcasing the positive aspect of our lives, with the balance of the negative aspect that we encounter every day. For someone with an eating disorder, or any mental health disorder, that only accentuates their problems. Recent cases have made us all stop and think. There is so much pro-ana and pro-mia material promoting a harmful mindset, which forms or heightens an eating disorder. We must not forget that this material is often put up by sufferers themselves, so we must push supportive materials towards those who promote such images and material.

In summary, I would like to thank all hon. Members for supporting this debate. I know that it is close to the hearts of many in this place. I hope that the Minister will show those who have suffered, those who are suffering and those who do not yet know that they will suffer that this Government are on their side. I hope the Minister will show that we will never rest on our laurels, but will continue to address the flaws and increase our ambition, reduce waiting times, develop support and facilities for those who need it, wherever they live in the country, intervene early and offer the right support throughout the whole process, expel the postcode lottery of support, encourage our world-class universities to improve teaching programmes, so that they are in line with the impact this disease has on so many, and ensure that social media companies play their part in bucking this trend. We have to help those who are, through no fault of their own, helpless about their own aid. For many it will be the first time in their lives, because that is what Government is here to do: help you when you cannot help yourself.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Before I move on to the other speakers, I point out for the record that the intervention was made by Rachael Maskell, not Louise Haigh, her close friend. However, I noticed that she did not notice; confusion reigns. I call Paul Farrelly.

9.47 am

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) on her success in securing this debate during Eating Disorders Awareness Week. I thank Beat, the eating disorders campaign group, for its unstinting efforts on behalf of the more than 1 million sufferers across the UK. After this debate, from 11 o’clock to 3 pm, during the lobby of Parliament, I am hosting a drop-in event with my good friend, the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), in room R of Portcullis House; colleagues here and those listening can go there to find out more about Beat’s work.

This debate follows that secured last October by the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), which shows that support for this cause is truly cross-party. We also had a debate on the subject in September with the children’s Minister, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), highlighting the issues for vulnerable children going into adulthood. In that debate, I focused on concerns that regularly pop up in my area of north Staffordshire for young adults suffering from anorexia, bulimia and other eating disorders, which have such devastating effects on them and their families.

The impact on young adults is one example of a core concern of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman’s groundbreaking 2017 report, which I will focus on again today. This suffering and vulnerability does not stop when children reach the age of 18. However, in my immediate locality—Newcastle-under-Lyme, Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Moorlands, which have a population of well over 600,000 people—the commissioning of specialist support and treatment does stop at the age of 18.

Staffordshire is served by six clinical commissioning groups, with one common accountable officer. The budget for specialist, post-18 eating disorder services in the four CCGs serving the centre, east and south of the county is £428,000 a year, but for the North Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent CCGs, it is exactly zero. Sufferers who, up to the age of 18, had been used to specialist support in the community or at in-patient facilities have had to rely thereafter on the hard-pressed, overstretched and generalist child and adult mental health teams. It is a postcode lottery—an “unwarranted variation”, in the NHS jargon—that has persisted for far too long, is patently unfair and lets local families down badly.

Of course, the last thing those families and their children want is the publicity that would bring pressure to bear on the CCGs to change course and give them the specialist support that is available just a few miles
down the road. Last September, however, after our debate here, one of my constituents, Sarah Pustkowski, was brave enough to speak out publicly about the effects on her.

Sarah is 25 and developed anorexia nervosa when she was 16. She is slowly recovering—touch wood—but her father says that she is not out of the woods yet. Her case shows how long the anomaly in our area has persisted, because her dad first approached me in 2014 when she was 20 to relate what a cliff edge they had fallen off, in terms of specialist support.

Until then, Sarah had access to the excellent Kinver Centre, a hospital in Stafford just down the A34. When discharged, however, all the expert support that the family was used to stopped, because our CCGs failed to commission it. The Kinver Centre can admit people from all over the country, not just the county, but not from north Staffordshire, Stoke-on-Trent or Staffordshire Moorlands, because our CCGs provide no funding. Sarah and her family are not alone.

Since the autumn, we have been working with sufferers, concerned local health professionals and providers, and Beat to resolve the situation. A business case has been drawn up for the two CCGs as part of their annual prioritisation process, which aims at consistent commissioning across the county. The professionals involved are more hopeful than before, but, with intense financial pressures on our NHS, I pray that the dawn does not again prove false in the coming weeks.

Something that should help to make the case and, one would hope, to inform and form Government policy, is information as to what happens across the country as a whole. Last October, after our debate here, we asked the new Secretary of State which of the 190-plus CCGs in England also did not provide specialist 18-plus eating disorder services. His written reply stated:

“This information is not held centrally…NHS England does not hold information about all of the specific services commissioned by individual CCGs.”

But specialist in-patient units are commissioned by NHS England, so the response could have been more helpful.

The Secretary of State’s reply went on to say that the Government were investing £150 million in community-based care for eating disorders, which will mean that “70…new or extended…services are now either open or in development”, which will benefit “at least 3,350 children and young people a year”.

We are still, however, at a loss to know precisely where. Perhaps the Minister could write to us with some more details after the debate.

In December, we served freedom of information requests on all 190-plus of England’s CCGs about the full extent of their services and funding. As hon. Members who have done that before know, it is a mammoth exercise that takes quite some following up. Thankfully, only a handful of CCGs did not respond and are being chased, and about 25 swerved the questions and gave little meaningful information, but the overall picture for adults and young adults is certainly better than the situation in North Staffordshire, and no doubt in the areas of many hon. Members present. The majority do provide specialist 18-plus services—in the community, at least.

There is still a glaring hole in the picture of specialist adult in-patient provision, however. Most CCGs defaulted on that question and referred it to our old friends at NHS England. Coming full circle, we formally FOI-ed it, too, in the new year. Under the statutory limits, a reply was due by last Thursday, but despite chasing, none has yet come. It would have been good to have had it by the end of last week to inform our local business case, and it would have been respectful to the families and sufferers for NHS England to have responded before this awareness week.

I am sorry to speak at length about our travails, but the saga demonstrates only too clearly how difficult it is for conscientious campaigners such as Beat, the families and the MPs who support them to lay their hands on the information they need. If it is difficult for us, it is fair to ask how Ministers can draw up effective and informed policy, and make sure that recommendations for improvement, such as those in the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman’s report, are put into practice.

One of the five core recommendations in that report was that “The Department of Health and NHS England should review the existing quality and availability of adult eating disorder services to achieve parity with child and adolescent services.” It is that lack of parity, and the progress in reducing it, that we have been so frustratingly trying to get to the bottom of in the last six months. If the Minister has more information, I hope that she will share it with us and, importantly, ensure that NHS England does, too.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Before I call John Lamont, I inform hon. Members that I intend to start calling the Front-Bench spokespeople by 10.30 am at the latest. After some simple arithmetic, that works out as about five minutes per speaker, if we are to get everybody in, as I intend to. I will not impose a hard time limit now, but each speaker should bear that in mind.

9.55 am

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) on securing this important debate during Eating Disorders Awareness Week. She made a passionate, well-informed and thoughtful speech, which I learned much from.

In my area of the Scottish Borders, some great charities and organisations work with young people to overcome issues such as eating disorders. There are now counsellors in every high school in the Scottish Borders, so teenagers have someone to speak to at school who is not a parent or teacher. We also have a specialist eating disorder nurse based in the Scottish Borders and some great work is done in the child and adolescent mental health service to support younger people.

I am sure that there are many good examples around the country. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) has spoken to me about the Brownhill...
eating disorder clinic in his constituency. He holds the clinicians and the work they do for his constituents in high regard.

Treatment across Scotland is patchy to say the least. In the Scottish Borders, there are no community tier 1 services aimed at preventing the onset of eating disorders locally and waiting times for help are far too high, as we have heard. I will focus on the impact that technology can have on the issue. The all-party parliamentary group on technology addiction looks at how smartphones, tablets and social media can have a detrimental impact on our health.

We have all seen the shocking stories about how diet pills, some of which contain lethal substances, are readily available to buy on social media, or how eating disorder-related hashtags and accounts are available and easily accessible to vulnerable people. Some of the content is more subtle. Platforms where we show only the best of ourselves mean that young people in particular can find it harder to feel content with their lives. Online images of thin and happy people clearly act as a trigger for some.

Social media platforms are working to tackle the issue and remove negative content, and so they should be. The idea of allowing the promotion of a category of mental health illness that kills so many people is completely unacceptable. I agree with those who argue that the likes of Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are on their final warning and that if they do not step up to properly tackle the issue, it is time to regulate. Given the clear link between mental health and social media use or abuse, there is certainly a case for requiring tech companies to mitigate the negative effects of their product, as the tobacco and alcohol industries are required to.

Although TV, films and social media are undoubtedly part of the problem, it is important to recognise the good work that some do. There are more documentaries and storylines in our soaps raising awareness about eating disorders. Social media platforms are also taking some action to tackle the issue. For example, Instagram has rolled out a warning that displays when users search for pro-eating disorder content and offers them help and support.

**Matt Warman** (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for making an excellent speech. Does he agree that this process should be about more than warnings and that there should be a proactive attempt to stop this sort of material being visible in the first place, which needs to be algorithmic and technology-based, so that people can recover in the community?

**John Lamont** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I, too, pay tribute to the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair), who secured this debate and made an excellent speech, and to the other colleagues who have contributed to it so far.

Without doubt, eating disorders have acquired a greater profile in recent years, and there are two things that are apparent and that we can learn from. One is that, as a society, we are better at talking about these things, and organisations such as Beat, which has already been mentioned, do outstanding work in making people feel that the stigma around these issues is something that we, as a society, need to get over, and therefore people will feel more comfortable about coming forward, which is good.

The second lesson that we might learn is that we are a society that, for some of the reasons that have already been mentioned, increasingly breeds poor mental health. So, I will focus my remarks on the support—or lack of it—for young people living with mental health conditions and particularly for those with eating disorders in my constituency of Westmorland and Lonsdale.

Very often, it is the parents who come to me first. Parents come to me with two clear emotions: one is terror; and the other is guilt. It is absolutely essential that we are clear to people with eating disorders, and indeed to those who love and support them, that there is absolutely no need for guilt; there is no blame attached whatever. Likewise, we need to tackle the fear and the terror, which often stem from a lack of understanding or an absence of hope as to where to go next, by showing that there are things that we can do to help.

In my constituency, we estimate that three quarters of young people with eating disorders were not seen within the target time of one month, and that 100% of those with an urgent need were not seen within the target time of two weeks. That is not acceptable, but what is even more terrifying is that the numbers involved are ludicrous. In the year up to August 2018, a grand total of 13 young people in South Lakeland were registered as living with eating disorders, which is baloney: we all know that that is not true. I would comfortably say that the real number is 10 times higher. In my office, we deal with at least one new case of an eating disorder every single week. So what is happening, such that our young people with eating disorders are falling through the gaps? We need to look at a whole range of things, but I especially ask the Minister to in ivestigate personally why this is happening, to look at a whole range of things, but I especially ask the Minister to investigate personally why this is happening, particularly in South Lakeland but—I suspect—around the country as well.

One GP got in touch with me about this issue. I will not name her, but she was very keen for me to share her experience with everyone here in Westminster Hall and everyone who is listening. She did not have any training at all in mental health while she was gaining her qualifications, but she has sought to bring herself up to speed on it in her job. She is a general practitioner. She
does her best to help young people and indeed people of all ages presenting with mental health conditions, but she feeds people into the system, or refers people into it, and there is no triage.

There is no general triage once a young person has been referred for help: “Does this person have anxiety?”; “Does this person have an eating disorder?”; or, “Does this person have some other condition?” That person could be referred to the wrong silo and then sit there for months, undiagnosed or misdiagnosed. I am sure that is one window into why such pitifully low numbers of people are being diagnosed, against the backdrop of what I think are many hundreds of people living with a condition who are left in desperation and not even getting the beginnings of the support that they desperately need. We are failing to catch our children and our young people when they are at their most vulnerable, so how can we then go and help them?

Anorexia nervosa has the highest mortality rate of any psychiatric disorder in adolescence. The consequences for someone of not getting the right treatment are absolutely huge and extremely serious. However, even those who are diagnosed—this goes for younger people and for adults—may not get the help that they need. Colleagues have already referred to the fact that people will have experience—I have, with constituents of mine—of being told, “Frankly, you’re not thin enough yet. Come back when you are. You are not manifesting physical conditions to back up your mental health condition, therefore come back later on.”

Would somebody who had been fortunate enough to have been diagnosed with cancer at stage 1 be told, “Clear off till you’ve got stage 4. Come back when you’re at death’s door”? Come off it, but that is how we treat people with mental health conditions and in particular people living with eating disorders. There are people with eating disorders—I can think of some who I know myself—who may have experienced no appreciable or noticeable weight loss. They still have an eating disorder, which needs to be tackled, and tackled quickly.

In Cumbria, three years ago—to the week—we were promised a specialist one-to-one eating disorder service for young people. Three years on, it still does not exist. That is why so many people will be cynical about promises made at this time of year at events such as this. We want to see real delivery for all of our young people in every part of the country.

Finally, the Government—rightly—emphasised preventive care in the NHS long-term plan just a few weeks ago. However, just a few days before Christmas they had sneaked out the funding cuts for public health, which is genuinely preventive care. Those cuts included a £500,000 cut in preventive health care in Cumbria. At the moment in Cumbria, we spend 75p per child on preventive health care. If we want to support those people who may struggle with eating disorders in the future, it is vital that we invest early and invest now. That will be not only more efficient and more effective, but far, far kinder.

10.6 am

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Bailey, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) for securing this important debate in Eating Disorders Awareness Week.

According to YoungMinds, one in 12 teenagers in the United Kingdom suffers from eating disorders, and about 25% of those with eating disorders are noted as being male. Statistics for 2017-18 recorded that 536 Scots were treated for eating disorders. Eating disorders are complex illnesses that take many forms, such as anorexia nervosa, which was mentioned earlier, whereby people erroneously believe that they are overweight.

The root causes of these disorders are unclear, but they may include things such as career choices. The biographies of many jockeys speak of crash dieting and sometimes dehydrating themselves with the aid of saunas, to reach a low weight prior to a race. The image of the ballerina is of a slight and fragile figure floating through the air. What must it take to maintain such a body image? In show-business, there are child stars of stage and screen for whom the limelight proves too much, or perhaps they fear losing popularity during the transition to adulthood. How will growing up affect their future career?

It is important not to stereotype and to be alert to the fact that eating disorders befall people regardless of their age, gender, race, or socioeconomic circumstances. What is clear are the dangers associated with the resulting malnutrition and the serious complications, such as osteoporosis, low blood pressure, heart failure, oedema and anaemia. Anorexia can be life-threatening; it is one of the leading causes of deaths related to mental health problems. Every single such loss is a tragedy for the individual themselves and their family—and indeed, the unnecessary loss of a life is also a tragedy for the nation.

Binge eating is characterised by an uncontrolled addiction to food, involving over-eating and exceedingly fast eating in secret, whether the person is hungry or not. And bulimia is a combination of the worst elements of both anorexia and binge eating.

Encouragement to seek treatment at the earliest opportunity will no doubt enhance the chances of recovery, which very often is a long-term process, requiring an immense amount of support from professionals and family members. However, as with any addiction, the person must acknowledge their problem—in this case, unhealthy eating—and they themselves must want to seek assistance. Anxiety and depression are common threads, whether as a cause or a result of an eating disorder.

I acknowledge the good work of the child and adolescent mental health staff of NHS Ayrshire & Arran, but from the complaints I have heard at surgeries from my constituents about waiting times for appointments, it is clear that the numbers of those much-welcomed professional staff do not match society’s demand for their time and support. When individuals with eating disorders reach out for help, we as a society must grasp that hand and be there for them. I welcome the new guidelines for Scotland announced at the beginning of this week, which it is stated will assist in providing a range of approaches to mental health issues, ensuring that help is available when and where it is needed.

In closing, I ask both Governments to continue providing vital funding for much-needed support services for persons afflicted with eating disorders and their heartbroken families—heartbroken does not sum it up; it does not describe the agony and the pain that those families go through. I also ask them to consider whether there needs to be enhanced control of slimming and dietary

[Tim Farron]
products, especially the marketing of those products to young and vulnerable individuals. I understand from the news that only this week, concerns were expressed by Food Standards Scotland that DNP—dinitrophenol, an industrial chemical—is being illegally marketed as a slimming pill, which FSS considers to be potentially lethal. It is still available to purchase on the internet, and we as a Government need to rein in social media platforms that permit, condone, or have a policy of turning a blind eye for the pursuit of profit, regardless of the health and wellbeing of our young people. As a Government, as has been said earlier, we must seriously bring those people to book for the damage and harm that they are causing to families throughout the United Kingdom.

10.11 am

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) for having secured this important debate, and I am delighted to participate in it, although I wish it was not necessary. A debate about Eating Disorders Awareness Week is, of course, very important.

Despite what we have heard, in so many ways, we have come so far with regards to this illness. I think back to someone of the stature of Karen Carpenter, who died in 1983 at the age of 32, when I was 15 years old. Those of us among the general population who mourned her passing did not appreciate what an eating disorder was. It has to be said that we are still learning, but we are having this debate during Eating Disorders Awareness Week, at a time when the general public are more aware—and becoming much more aware—of an illness that so many people can fall prey to. This week is an international event that aims to raise further awareness of the issue of eating disorders, and the stigma that too often goes with them. Charities work hard to encourage people from all walks of life to come forward, because as we have heard, this illness respects no gender, no class and no race.

This week, the UK eating disorder charity Beat has continued to work very hard to break down the barriers that so many people face when they try to access support. It is important that those living with this condition and their families know that they are not alone, so sharing stories of how an eating disorder has affected others from all walks of life can be a powerful tool. Those who are in the darkest days of this disorder can be greatly comforted by hearing the stories and experiences of those who have lived with it, but have come through it and are in recovery. However, we also need to remember, as we heard earlier, that eating disorders can still be present during the process of recovery, and indeed can overshadow a person’s entire life, even when recovery might seem a long time ago.

One of the key barriers to tackling eating disorders is that too often, they are stereotyped and not taken seriously. Only by continuing to raise awareness of the struggles that sufferers go through, by talking about eating disorders in places like this and by supporting charities in their outreach work, can we make the change happen that we all want. We have heard—it is worth repeating—that social media has brought added complications to dealing with an already complex condition. Our young people are immersed in social media, a forum that projects so-called “perfect” images of lifestyles and bodies, and given how much young people are exposed to those images, it is not difficult to see how a young, vulnerable person could lose sight of what looks healthy or real. We know about the scandal of particular websites advising people on how to not eat without it being noticed by friends and family, which is very chilling indeed.

We need to continue to drive improvements in mental health services and ensure that everyone who needs high-quality mental health services, including people with eating disorders, has access to the care that they need when they need it. There is no denying that there have been positive first steps in increasing the visibility and public awareness of eating disorders and mental health challenges over the past decade. However, the demand on mental health services is so great that we must always seek ways to do better by those who need the specialist support that those conditions require.

Challenges remain for mental health services across the United Kingdom, and it is worth remembering that since the year 2000, the number of people diagnosed with eating disorders has risen by 15%, and that hospital admissions for adult males suffering from an eating disorder have risen by 70% over the past six years. That demonstrates the scale of the challenge that we face. On top of that, on average, it takes about 149 weeks before those experiencing an eating disorder even begin to seek help—that is almost three years lost. Offering support in ways that match young people’s lives—in fact, these days, all people’s lives—means increasing the amount of online peer support that can assist with recovery. That peer support allows someone living with this disorder to pair with a trained volunteer who has recovered from an eating disorder, who can share their experiences and offer support as and when it is needed.

Having this week dedicated to raising the profile of this illness, talking about it, and recognising its complexities and its stigma is a good start, and represents very good progress from where we were in the 1980s, when so many of us could not understand how Karen Carpenter died or appreciate the full extent of the difficulties that her family had gone through. We have come a long way, but we have a long way to go, and this debate shows that we are keen to go further down that road.

10.17 am

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) on having secured this debate, especially during this important week—Eating Disorders Awareness Week. Last month, we had a debate on eating disorders, during which I revealed my own struggle with body dysmorphia when I was a teenager. Since then, I have gone on a journey. My mother spoke to me after that debate and asked, “Why didn’t you say anything?” I said, “Well, it was normal. That was how I thought everybody acted. I wanted to look that way, and it was normal and personal.” My mother said, “The only thing I noticed was that you during that period was that you were a little bit obsessive and compulsive about things”, but that was a symptom of what I was going through.

I am one of the lucky ones, because my body dysmorphia went away on its own. I feel that I have gone on a journey since our previous debate. So many people have
contacted me, including people I know or I have met through my job as a Member of Parliament, and talked about their personal struggles with eating disorders. Those I thought of as confident, or those I looked up to, have said to me that they struggled with the problem of an eating disorder. For them, it was a personal and private battle, as it was for me. I pay tribute to those people for the courage that they have shown in admitting that they had a problem.

I also pay tribute to Beat for all the work it does to ensure that people feel they have a safe space in which to talk about the problems they are going through. As the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) has said, such a space did not exist when I was suffering from body dysmorphia in the 1990s, but it is there now. Another thing I learned when I met Hope Virgo and her fantastic Dump The Scales campaign team was that eating disorders are not necessarily about weight. So many people go to their GP, but get turned away because they are not light enough. They do not get help, so they turn to other mechanisms to cope.

A number of Members have talked about social media. I want to make it clear that in many respects, social media is a force for good. However, as the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) said, there is so much pro-ana and pro-mia content, and it is widespread on social media. Instagram has made progress on banning images that contain suicide or self-harm. It has banned certain hashtags, but that does not stop people from going into them. It is a real problem. Some websites I have looked at are helpful and provide the type of support that sufferers of eating disorders need. People are allowed to post a diary. They meet a community that is there to help them, but other websites mask their communities. They start off by saying, “Yes, there is help for you”, but then it suddenly moves on to, “How to hide your eating disorder from your parent”, “How to hide your eating disorder from your school”, and “Anorexia and bulimia are normal.” I should make it clear that if someone does not have an eating disorder, those images of eating disorder will not bring one about. However, such images do affect the most vulnerable in society.

A recent BBC investigation in 2018 led to Instagram placing more harmful hashtags relating to eating disorders on an “unsearchable” list; if somebody enters one of those terms, no results will appear in the search box. Instagram now has more terms—including alternative spellings of “suicide” or “anorexia”, using “1” instead of “I”—that, when searched for, direct people to help and health warnings. One search term had 38 alternative spellings that could still be used by users to access harmful images. It is all very well Instagram using warm words to the Government about banning those harmful images. It is all very well Instagram using warm words to the Government about banning those harmful images. It is all very well Instagram using warm words to the Government about banning those harmful images. It is all very well Instagram using warm words to the Government about banning those harmful images. It is all very well Instagram using warm words to the Government about banning those harmful images.

I do not want to eat into others’ time. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for the work she has done in bringing eating disorders to the fore. I spoke in her earlier debate, too, so I will bring my remarks to a close. The Government have to be careful when they regulate social media. The content could simply be driven underground into WhatsApp groups or the dark web. I raised this issue with the Prime Minister a couple of weeks ago at Prime Minister’s questions. She agreed to the Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries meeting me, Beat and Hope Virgo, who has her Dump The Scales campaign, to talk about how we can bring about a system that discourages eating disorders and provides the support that people need. I make one advertisement for Hope’s campaign: if people have not signed her petition, please do so. She is up to 68,000 signatures this morning. She needs 100,000 for the petition to be debated here, so that we can bring about a serious debate on eating disorders.

I say this to anyone suffering from an eating disorder: you are not alone. Look at the people around you—not just the MPs, but the people in the Public Gallery. There is support there for you. This is personal and private, but when you find the courage to talk about it, there are people there for you. I urge anyone with an eating disorder to find it in themselves to talk to someone.

10.23 am

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) for securing this important debate. It has already been said that this debate has cross-party support, and we have come a long way in recognising and understanding eating disorders. I find it depressing that although we have made this progress, increasing numbers of people are suffering from eating disorders. We must get away from just talking and start getting some change. I hope that Eating Disorders Awareness Week will bring about that change, so that we do not stand here next year without having made significant progress.

I will limit my remarks to the research that Beat has done that shows that eating disorders do not discriminate, and the importance of early intervention and prevention. Over the past five months, I have been campaigning to raise awareness. I have spoken before in this place about the need to recognise eating disorders early. Stories such as Hope’s highlight how ludicrous it is for people seeking help to be told that they are not thin enough.

At the heart of any improvement to eating disorders treatment lies education—of our medical staff, of the whole of society, of schools and of families. I have personal experience of a family member with an eating disorder, so I know very much how families and friends suffer around a sufferer. It is not just the sufferer who is affected, but those around them.

Eating disorders are too often trivialised and seen as an illness that exclusively affects one type of person. That is reinforced by research released this week by Beat, which found that discrimination was ingrained in how we view eating disorders. Beat’s research found that four in 10 people believed that eating disorders were more common among white people, and nearly 30% thought that eating disorders were most likely to affect people from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. The reality is that eating disorders do not discriminate.

The tragedy of eating disorders is that they are preventable. By focusing on early intervention, the numbers of those suffering can be greatly reduced, but the stereotypes around eating disorders mean that certain people are far less likely to recognise the condition and seek or be referred to treatment. For example, ethnic minorities are substantially less likely to be referred to eating disorders.
disorder services than white patients, but once referred, ethnic minorities receive the same treatment as white patients. A central problem is what doctors and the public understand about the population of people who suffer from eating disorders. The network of family and friends who surround those with eating disorders make a great deal of difference to their recognising the condition and receiving the correct help.

Research on specialist out-patient family intervention for children shows that it is highly effective and reduces the need for in-patient care, which eases pressure on the NHS. New ways of looking much more holistically at the treatment of eating disorders are highly effective, and we should look at them. The research identifies the importance of a truly joined-up approach to recovery, ensuring that the community around an individual with an eating disorder is supportive and supported by the medical team. Those types of programmes are being run in select areas across the country, and they must be extended, given their positive outcomes.

Treatments for eating disorders is a postcode lottery. We need to look at that. We must set standards and deliver training that will help doctors and medical staff to identify people who need treatment, regardless of any preconceived stereotypes. Additionally, it is vital that we continue to listen to the stories of real people who have suffered from eating disorders, and hear what they have to say about their experiences of the system.

The last thing I want to mention is the Local Government Association’s “Bright Futures” campaign. It highlights to councils across the country the importance of increasing funding, and ensuring that all the promised £1.7 billion for children’s mental health is spent in children’s mental health, not elsewhere. Prevention and early intervention, for children’s mental health is spent in children’s mental funding, and ensuring that all the promised £1.7 billion to councils across the country the importance of increasing.

We want to improve our services. Today, we heard that there are gaps in eating disorder services in just about every area. We have also heard how things have moved on. When Karen Carpenter had an eating disorder and sadly died, there was not much awareness at all. Now, there is greater awareness, but that has raised demand. It is incumbent on us to ensure that we are able to meet that demand, so that when young people, or people of any age, come forward, they get help in a timely fashion.

The hon. Member for Angus spoke about stigma, an extremely important issue. She also spoke about how the stigma affects ethnic minorities, particularly males, and prevents them from coming forward. We must do much more to ensure equality in service provision, and send the message that eating disorders do not discriminate. We must support everybody who comes forward.

I want to thank the voluntary agencies who work in this field so tirelessly: the Beat campaigns, many of whom are here today; our NHS staff up and down the United Kingdom, who do their utmost every day, often going beyond the call of duty in the work that they do; and the Scottish Eating Disorders Interest Group, who also do a great deal of work in the field.

The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) talked about the lack of psychological support, which I hope the Minister can comment on. We have heard eating disorders described as being about weight, which is wrong on so many levels. It is psychological as well as physical. Relying simply on physical manifestations of eating disorders means that many people do not get the treatment they should at the time that they should. Often people who have, for instance, bulimia might not have a reduction in weight, and it will therefore not be obvious to a practitioner unless they have specialist, or at least additional, training in primary care and specialist services.

We have spoken a lot today about anorexia and have mentioned bulimia, but there has been no mention of obesity, interestingly, around which there is a real stigma across the population. We need to do more to make sure that those who suffer from obesity have psychological support, too, because their journey to recovery is extremely important. Again, that is linked with mental health.

Crucially, the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) spoke about technology and images online. We have done a lot of work in the all-party group on textiles and fashion, which I chair, to look at the impact of social media and the industry on body image, and the negative and stereotypical images that very few of us will ever live up to, and should not aspire to. Often the images are not healthy, either. Much more has to be done. I agree with him on what he said about regulation of the companies, the information that is put out, and being proactive.

We also heard from the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), who spoke about lack of support and comorbidity, mental health issues being very much conjoined with eating disorders. When I worked as a psychologist in mental health services, often referrals would come in for individuals who had depression or anxiety, but underlying that was a long-standing eating disorder. That is why it is important that training in primary care reaches out across community mental health teams, and is not just given to specialist eating disorder services, because often the initial referral will not give an indication of the underlying difficulty.

The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) spoke about bulimia and the new guidelines for Scotland, which he welcomed. We know there is an issue with providing services for people in rural areas in a timeous fashion. I am pleased that the Scottish Government have dedicated £54 million to look at that. There will be new guidelines in line with SIGN, the Scottish intercollegiate guidelines network, and we look forward to collaborating on taking those issues further.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship in this debate on Eating Disorders Awareness Week, Mr Bailey. We have certainly raised awareness today, cross-party, and have paid credit to the week. We will continue to work together on this.

I thank the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) for introducing this important debate. She feels strongly about this issue and wants to contribute. She mentioned that she had contacted the Minister for Mental Health in Scotland and would like an appointment with her to discuss services. I am sure we can work together to take things forward, and to ensure that collaboration throughout the United Kingdom continues.

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My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) spoke about peer support, which is extremely important. Young people are often much more able to reach out to other young people, so I ask the Minister: what best practice is happening around that, and what can we roll out across the United Kingdom? One of my local schools, Duncanrig Secondary, is doing mental health peer support work very successfully. It is that type of project that young people grasp hold of to make a difference for each other. I pay tribute to the Trust Jack Foundation in my constituency, which reaches out to young people with mental health problems and has filled a gap in our local services in Stonehouse. Its service is being used assiduously by our local young people.

The hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) spoke about his eating disorder, body dysmorphia, and personal struggle. That is such an important message to give in Parliament. In coming forward and seeking support, he is a role model for others, so I thank him for that. He also spoke about why it is so important to have person-centred and holistic care, and I entirely agree with that.

The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) is an absolute champion in the field. She has collected thousands and thousands of signatures, and we support her work across this House in a truly cross-party effort to ensure we get the services that people require. I am sure the campaign that she runs to raise awareness will be successful in making a difference to people.

When I worked in psychology in the NHS, it was difficult at times to bridge the gap between primary, secondary and tertiary care, and difficult for people to be referred smoothly. I have raised that with Ministers in Scotland. When people present with an eating disorder, they do not always say, “I have an eating disorder. Can you help me?”; so it is key to have the training in place and a smooth care pathway—the two issues that I want the Minister to comment on. I know she is dedicated on this subject. I have met her numerous times, and I am keen to hear what she says today.

10.37 am

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I sincerely thank the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) for speaking about that. Beat does excellent work and has fantastic online resources, as do a number of other mental health charities. However, other sites that we have heard about that encourage people with regard to suicide and their eating disorders can be problematic to say the least.

The Government have made a commitment that, by 2020, 95% of children and young people who are referred with an eating disorder will be seen within one month, or one week if it is considered urgent. That is obviously very welcome, but with 2020 just around the corner I am concerned that, given current workforce and funding pressures, that will be difficult to achieve, or will possibly result in manipulation of waiting time figures. A patient will get a first appointment within the timescale, but any follow-up or effective treatment will still come many months, or even years, after referral. I would be grateful if the Minister would say how it will work in practice.

Although that is all well and good for children and young people, there are still no clear plans for adults with eating disorders. I recently visited a NAViGO...
service in Grimsby that supports people with eating disorders, and I was struck by how many people who were older than me were experiencing in-patient treatment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Paul Farrelly) talked about his constituent Sarah. I have a constituent who was diagnosed with an eating disorder at 16. Owing to the severity of her illness, she was sadly admitted to hospital for a lengthy stretch. On her release, she attended fortnightly appointments with an eating disorder specialist. As her recovery was going well, my constituent decided that she would like to take up an offer of a university place in Manchester, because despite her very difficult illness she had achieved the most fantastic A-level results. She saw going to university as a positive step in her healing and as a way of getting on with her life. The local NHS trust that delivers mental health services in my area informed her that she would have to transfer over to mental health services in Manchester.

Neither my constituent nor her family thought too much about that, as it was not raised in such a way that allowed them to foresee any issues. However, five months on, my constituent is still waiting for the handover to be completed and, sadly, during that time she has suffered a serious relapse and is once again looking at in-patient care. I recently attended the all-party parliamentary university group, and we talked about transition when people go to university, and about mental health in general. We need to look at that in some detail.

Paul Farrelly: Clearly, the administration in the health services that led to that outcome is of grave concern. It is also concerning when specialist services in a particular area stop for young people when they turn 18. Only those people going away to university or college in areas that provide such services, or those people whose families have a lot of money and can fund treatment privately, have the prospect of change. The people who are left are effectively discriminated against.

Paula Sherriff: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I absolutely agree. We had a very interesting discussion at the APPG about whether we could do more pre-screening when people go to university. We must also remember those in further education, not just those in higher education.

I ask the Minister whether what happened to my constituent would have happened had she been suffering from a serious physical condition. Earlier, a colleague made an analogy with cancer—"Your cancer is only at stage 1; we’re not going to treat you until it becomes more advanced." As we all know, eating disorders carry the highest mortality rate of any mental illness; yet this young lady has been left to suffer, in a new city, away from family and friends and without any support network. We all have to ask ourselves how on earth that was allowed to happen.

I commend the fantastic work being done to raise awareness of eating disorders and to support sufferers, and crucially their carers and families, by the charity Beat, some of whose representatives are in the Gallery. They work relentlessly to battle against the stigma of this dreadful disease, and to push for better access to services and treatments. When my office spoke to them about the case of my constituent, they said that sadly it was very typical of the stories that they hear every day on their helpline. How many families are going through the same mental torture day after day while waiting for that elusive appointment confirmation to drop through their letter box?

With no specific waiting time targets for adults with eating disorders and poorly funded mental health services, many overstretched mental health trusts are unable to put the necessary resources into those vital services, and treatment availability has become a hideous postcode lottery, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme highlighted. Service access and levels of funding vary widely from one area to the next.

Furthermore, there is a huge disparity between access to adult services and to those for children and young people, with adults on average waiting twice as long. The eating disorder charity Beat has had a huge rise in calls to its helpline over the last year. In 2017-18, Beat staff helped 17,000 people, and they estimate that by the end of 2018-19 they will have helped more than 30,000. It is commendable that they managed that increase in demand so well, and I know that with more funding they could help even more people.

In October 2018, following an eating disorder storyline, which Beat had been very involved in helping with, on the popular teenage soap “Hollyoaks”, calls to Beat’s helpline spiked to more than double those in any previous month. That highlights the need to raise awareness about eating disorders and, crucially, to quash the stereotypes and stigmas so that more people know that they can seek help earlier. Reportedly, it could take an adult with an eating disorder more than two years before they realise that they have an issue, and up to another two years to seek help. More needs to be done to increase awareness and access to treatments.

Beat recently undertook some research into eating disorder stereotypes. When people think of eating disorders they often think of young, white women, but that is a popular misconception. The reality is much more complex. More adults suffer from eating disorders than young people, and the number of male sufferers increases year on year, with people who identify as LGBT+ at significantly higher risk. Stereotypes prevent people from seeking and receiving medical treatment in the earlier stages, which, in turn, makes it harder for people to recover.

I am grateful that the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) raised over-eating. When we think of eating disorders, we often think of anorexia or bulimia. It is important that we consider the full spectrum of disorders. Beat’s research also found that people from black, Asian and minority ethnic and less affluent backgrounds would feel less confident in seeking help from a health professional for an eating disorder. That stigmatisation and fear of speaking out can have far reaching and dangerous consequences.

We also need to work to ensure better training for those on the frontline. The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) made an important point about training for those in health professions so that they can better recognise and support those who present with eating disorders.

Another constituent of mine waited more than two years to be seen by a psychiatrist for depression and anxiety. During that time, sadly, she also developed an eating disorder. She was consuming less than 700 calories...
a day and avoiding any foods with even a trace of fat, and her weight had plummeted over a period of six months, but at her first psychiatric appointment she was told that she was not underweight enough to be considered to have a serious eating disorder. At her second appointment, the psychiatrist weighed her and congratulated her on her increased weight and body mass index. As hon. Members can imagine, that was the last thing that she wanted to hear. The psychological effect set her recovery back by weeks.

Sadly, that was not an isolated incident. There are many fantastic people working on the frontline of our health services, but there is also a minority who would hugely benefit from extra awareness training in what an eating disorder looks like, how best to treat it and where to refer patients for treatment.

I know the Minister well and am satisfied that she has huge compassion in the area, but equally I hope that she has listened to the points raised in this debate and will press the Government to put eating disorders higher up the agenda, make promises and set targets that will ultimately save the lives of sufferers. She will have my full support in doing so.

10.50 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to this very constructive debate. They all showed massive care and compassion, with a recognition that we have come a long way but need to go a lot further. I am grateful for their constructive contributions.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) on securing this debate in Eating Disorders Awareness Week. I thank her for her very frank exposition of eating disorders, and of the helplessness felt not only by those who are suffering, but by those around them. It is essential that we ensure that people have access to the right mental health support in the right place and at the right time, because time is of the essence. Improving those services is a key priority for this Government, as part of our wider agenda to improve mental health services.

As several hon. Members have said, eating disorders are serious; they have some of the highest mortality rates of any mental health disorder. We need to ensure, more than ever, that people get access to support as early as possible, because eating disorders often begin when people are young. Representations have been made today about why our targets are for children, rather than adults. Those targets recognise the fact that early intervention is best and that issues often surface when people are younger, but that does not in any way diminish the challenge of ensuring that adults also have access to services.

That brings me to a point that several hon. Members have made: the perception that eating disorders affect only young white women. They do affect adults. I have heard of a case of an elderly lady in a care home being diagnosed with an eating disorder that she had obviously been suffering from for decades. One of the tests that I will set myself is for that never to happen again, because we need to ensure that people get early diagnosis.

As the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) very frankly reminded us, eating disorders affect men and boys too. If there is a perception otherwise, it may partly be because men and boys are much less likely to seek help than women and girls. We need to make it clear that the issue can affect absolutely anyone, as the hon. Gentleman showed very courageously by sharing his own experience; I am very grateful for his comments.

It is important to continue to raise awareness. We need to reduce the stigma associated with eating disorders so that people are more likely to talk about them. Like all hon. Members, I pay tribute to the campaigners who do so much to raise awareness, particularly the charity Beat, which does absolutely excellent work. I also pay tribute to Hope Virgo for her campaign and look forward to meeting her very soon.

We cannot emphasise strongly enough that this is not about weight; it is about the mind. Some of the stories that were shared in this debate were quite horrific. If there is such lack of understanding among medical professionals—if the people we trust to look after us end up doing harm because they see eating disorders as a weight issue—we have a serious problem to tackle. Of course training has its part to play, but I should add that we expect a lot of our GPs. One of the real challenges is to continue to roll out multidisciplinary GP service teams to ensure that there is much greater expertise in each medical practice, rather than relying on one individual to be the expert on everything. Frankly, they are only human beings—they are not God.

Wera Hobhouse: I thank the Minister for giving way; I know that her time is very limited. When services let people go too early, the danger of relapse is much higher. We could prevent relapses by not letting sufferers go too early, when they are half better but not fully better.

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Lady makes a good point that I will address further if I have time. We need to look carefully at the care pathway and at the whole practice of referrals and the journey that people take, so that we can ensure that they are in a position to manage their disorder. The truth is that no one is ever cured of these things; it is a matter of managing their wellbeing to tackle them.

I thank the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) for her acknowledgment that we have come a long way. She is right that we need to ensure that we have proper specialist services to do this work, because of the risk of harm. She is also right to mention obesity, which we could do an awful more to address. I watch a lot of rubbish TV—we work long hours here, so that is my relaxation—and I am horrified by some of the channels, which basically run a succession of programmes about weight that are almost freak shows. That is not how we should be talking about the issue if we want to encourage people to access help. We need to tackle the stigma around obesity as much as the stigma around any other disorder.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) and I have already discussed his concerns about his area. I know that there are challenges and we need to ensure that provision is sufficient. He spoke very frankly about the guilt and terror that people around those who suffer from eating disorders feel,
because they genuinely do not know how to help their friend or loved one. Reducing stigma and raising awareness is partly about helping people to understand what they can do. Everybody wants to help, because nobody wants to see people suffer so much.

Social media has been mentioned a lot. I absolutely recognise that it can be a force as much for good as for bad, but I must say that we are seeing content that encourages harmful behaviour. It is about the whole psychology of people joining communities. When people use social media regularly, they can become isolated from the physical world and join an online world in which everyone is like them. It becomes normalising, and it can worsen their experience.

Equally, social media can be a community of self-help. I agree completely with the hon. Member for Islington North that we have to be careful: of course we must challenge companies to be responsible, but it is not black and white, and we need to handle the issue sensitively. I am pleased to say that some companies are very responsive, but not all, so we will continue to challenge them. The hon. Gentleman raised an issue that particularly concerns me. It is one thing to regulate public platforms, but encrypted direct contact is having a growing impact. We need to look at Snapchat, WhatsApp and so on, because the fact is the Government are always three steps—probably more—behind technology.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow emphasised peer support. I could not agree more: peer support is important for mental health generally. If I could make one challenge to NHS commissioners, it would be to recognise that providing support to people who suffer mental ill health is not just about clinicians; it is about the voluntary sector and peer support workers. If we are to really step up to that challenge, I hope to see much more imagination in how services are commissioned.

I have so much more to say, but I am running out of time. With hon. Members’ indulgence, I will write to them—not least the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Paul Farrelly)—to outline our response to the points that they raised. We have a lot of figures and have shown that we are meeting targets, but I think all points that they raised. We have a lot of figures and have shown that we are meeting targets, but I think all the points that they raised. We have a lot of figures and have shown that we are meeting targets, but I think all points that they raised. We have a lot of figures and have shown that we are meeting targets, but I think all the points that they raised. We have a lot of figures and have shown that we are meeting targets, but I think all the points that they raised. We have a lot of figures and have shown that we are meeting targets, but I think all the points that they raised. We have a lot of figures and have shown that we are meeting targets, but I think all the points that they raised. We have a lot of figures and have shown that we are meeting targets, but I think all the points that they raised. We have a lot of figures and have shown that we are meeting targets, but I think all the points that they raised. We have a lot of figures and have shown that we are meeting targets, but I think all the points that they raised. We have a lot of figures and have shown that we are meeting targets, but I think all the points that they raised.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Adriatic Land 5 Ltd (Stevenage)

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. Would the people leaving the hall please leave quietly? Another debate is about to begin. I call Stephen McPartland.

11.1 am

Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered Adriatic Land 5 Ltd, Stevenage.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey, and to be here today to debate the impact of companies such as Adriatic Land 5 Ltd with the Minister. I know she has a personal desire to try to resolve such issues for leaseholders up and down the country.

Companies such as Adriatic Land 5 Ltd hold freeholds and charge ground rents. Often, the rents double every 10 to 15 years and there are other conditions, and it is that situation that is preventing homeowners in Stevenage from remortgaging or selling their properties. I want to talk a little about leasehold, about Adriatic Land 5 Ltd, and to give a few examples from constituents.

There is a discrepancy at the moment about how many leaseholders there are in the country. The figure ranges from 2.5 million, or 4.5 million, to the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership suggesting 5 million to 6 million in England and Wales alone. Scotland and Northern Ireland have different conditions. Today, I am addressing the situation in England and Wales, and in Stevenage in particular.

Leasehold is a form of residential tenure that has been abolished in most countries around the world. The Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act 2002 was passed with the best of intentions to give commonhold a big boost but, at the moment, that does not seem to have worked. My real focus and concern in this debate is leasehold and shared ownership. Often, first-time buyers have used Help to Buy to get on the ladder for the first time.

Adriatic Land 5 owns the freehold on a building in Stevenage called Six Hills House. Predominantly teachers, police officers, nurses and other public sector workers live there. They feel that they have been let down by their surveyors and the people that they purchased their properties from. They are first-time buyers who used Help to Buy to get on the ladder for the first time.

Who are Adriatic Land 5? We found it very difficult to find information about them, but we have had some help. We now understand that Adriatic Land is a residential freeholding company of various formulations, managed by the Long Harbour Ground Rent Fund. All Adriatic Land companies hide their ultimate beneficial ownership behind the directors of the Sanne Group, which has its headquarters in Guernsey. Long Harbour is a £1.4 billion fund and claims to have revenues of only £4 million on the ground rent fund, with a total of £340,000 in profits. Its sister company, Home Ground, told the Select Committee on Housing, Communities and Local Government in November 2018 that it collects £32 million per year in ground rent. Long Harbour claims to be investing in residential freehold primarily for pension funds, but there is no evidence of this, and there is a belief in the wider industry that predominantly hedge funds and speculators are behind it.

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Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
[Stephen McPartland]

Buyers of leasehold properties can be seen as tenants on a very long-term rental, while the freeholder owns the land that the home is built on. The homeowner of a leasehold property is required to pay ground rent to their freeholder, and the consent of the freeholder must be sought before any changes to the property are made, such as installing new windows or, if it is a house, a conservatory. The issue in my area is with flats. In flats, the ground rent often doubles every 10 years or so.

There is an accepted understanding that, as flats have communal spaces, there needs to be some kind of mechanism to collect money so that if the lifts break or there is a problem with the roof, everybody shares equally in the pain of putting that right financially. At the moment, companies such as Adriatic Land 5 do not seem to be providing any services, but are charging tenants in order to make a profit, and that is causing a great deal of disruption. In Six Hills House in Stevenage, it is preventing mortgage companies from offering mortgages. The homeowners in the flats are trapped, and that has caused huge concern among these decent public workers, who have tried to do the right thing and get on the housing ladder, and now seem to be trapped in the first home that they have bought.

There is a feeling in the wider media that these people should have known what they were getting themselves into; they should have read the contract; they were overexcited when they made the purchase. A first-time buyer considering a ground rent of £10 or £100, which will double in 10 or 15 years, does not expect to be there in 10 or 15 years; it is almost as if it does not apply. They do not expect to be there. Given that the mortgage company has extended a mortgage to that buyer, they do not imagine that as the terms get more onerous another mortgage company would refuse to remortgage or refuse to extend the terms to somebody else who then tries to buy it from them. The situation is causing a great deal of disruption.

My real concern is that these are shared-ownership properties, but the tenants seem to be responsible for 100% of the freehold, even though they will often only own 10%–15% or 25% of the actual property. The terms do not seem fair. All the barriers to moving forward in their lives seem to be loaded on the people who are 75% tenants and 25% homeowners. It does not seem fair.

Ground rents of as little as £1 a year used to be charged by many freeholders across the country. In the early years of this century, developers began inserting clauses where ground rent was set at £200 to £400 a year, with the charge doubling every 10 years or so. The Government have taken action on that; they have launched consultations and the previous Secretary of State announced that ground rents would be reduced on new home builds to zero or a £10 peppercorn rent. The current Secretary of State met a variety of leaseholder and retirement holder groups in late January. He also said that he thought a peppercorn rate was zero, so it could not double every 10 or 15 years and could not be a barrier to moving on in property.

The Government are trying to take action on the current situation—they are trying to stop it going forward—but there are real problems with retrospective action for people who are currently in these leases. The Minister and I have had some correspondence in the past on this issue, and I know she is keen to resolve it.

The hope was that developers would put pressure on the people who owned the freehold, then the freeholders would come to an agreement with the tenants, and as a result they would be able to move forward.

I will give some examples from the case of Six Hills House in Stevenage. One of my constituents said:

“I live in a fairly new department block of flats in Stevenage that were built in 2016 called Six Hills House. I moved in in November 2016 and bought a 45% share as a shared ownership help to buy scheme. This year it came to light that the lease has a clause in it that states the ground rent (which currently stands at £300 per year) will double every 15 years with a break at 90 years. Whilst this wasn’t a problem for lenders in 2016 when the flats went on sale, it has since become illegal for leaseholds to include this type of clause and has therefore made the flats unsellable to anyone other than cash buyers. I have recently put mine up for sale and whilst I found a buyer within a week, no banks would lend on the mortgage and so the estate agents have advised that I cancel all other viewings and limit to cash buyers only.”

This is two years after the individual bought their property. The constituent continues:

“…I feel this option is extremely limited as the shared ownership proposition is meant for first time buyers who wouldn’t necessarily have the money to buy this share outright leaving a building of around 150 flats unsellable. I have spoken with Metropolitan Housing who are the landlords for the rented part of the building who have said that they are trying to negotiate this clause with land charter who own the building however they have not heard anything back from them and they couldn’t give a timescale that this would be sorted.

This now means that the people who have put their flats up for sale including myself have paid out for private valuation fees…to get the flats to sale we are left out of pocket with flats on the market that we are unable to sell. Plus I have now come out of a fixed mortgage rate thinking I was going to sell after 2 years which was the original plan and am now paying a higher interest each month without having the option to fix in again in case it does sell.”

She goes on to say that she wanted to get in contact and explains some of the other reasons why. I stepped in and asked Land Charter what had happened. It confirmed:

“…Metropolitan Housing Association purchased all the apartments from us, and then sold them on to their clients. The freehold was sold soon thereafter to Adriatic Land 5 Ltd…Although we have sympathy we have not control over the matters raised by her.”

We are still not aware of whether it was Metropolitan Housing or the developer, Land Charter, that sold the freehold. I have spoken to Metropolitan Housing, which responded in December 2018:

“Thank you for your communication received…We can confirm that Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing are not the Freehold owner of this site. We have a head lease which requires us to pay Ground Rent to the Freeholder and we have created under leases for our residents which require them also to pay ground rent as per the head lease.

When the lease was originally entered into, it was common for ground rent clauses doubling every 15 years to be included. Whilst this is not illegal it is now not considered to be good practice and the Government are currently consulting on restricting ground rent on new leases. We do not believe they will be regulating existing leases which have already been entered into.

The ground rent payable at present is a reasonable amount, however when a resident attempts to sell their property, the mortgage company of the proposed purchaser declines to lend as the lease contains potentially onerous ground rent terms for the future. In effect, this means that the properties can only be sold to cash buyers.”

That is Metropolitan Housing Association, which owns most of the shared ownership, confirming that the people trapped in those 150 flats cannot sell their properties.
unless they do so to cash buyers, because of the nature of the lease. In fairness, Metropolitan is trying to fix the issue. It says:

“We first became aware of this issue a few months ago and we wrote to the Freeholder asking them to vary the Ground Rent clauses in the lease in light of the wider publicity around onerous Ground Rent terms and the effect it was having on sales. The lease can only be varied if the Freeholder consents. The Freeholder refused to allow any variation in the lease stating that they purchased the Freehold in good faith based on the potential income from Ground Rent.”

It goes on to explain why Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing, as a social housing provider, cannot step in and resolve the issue financially.

I have had correspondence with the Minister on this issue, and other constituents have contacted me. People in this block of 150 flats are increasingly frustrated. I received an update from a constituent on the solution that has come forward from Metropolitan. The constituent states:

“They’ve given the option for us to extend the head lease. However, this will come at a cost and we will also be required to pay all our legal fees, including Metropolitan’s and the freeholder’s legal costs etc.”

She attached the letter for my reference, which I could read out, but I will just read it to the Minister instead. It is easily working out to be around £10,000, which is half the deposit that the constituents saved up to get on the ladder in the first place and enter into the part-buy and rent scheme. She says:

“If I decided to go down this route and spend £10,000 to get out of this lease, allowing me to sell, I’d then be left with half the deposit I did have, unable to buy somewhere new or benefit from any other first-time buyer schemes again.”

As I say, Metropolitan has come up with a means by which it will vary the head lease and do what it can to extend that forward over the 90 years, so that the current tenants have to pay only a small, peppercorn rate. Unfortunately it will cost the tenants over £10,000, because although they own only part of these properties, they are responsible for 100% of the freehold fees. As a result, they have to pay both the shared ownership and freeholder fees, which come to over £10,000.

Essentially, no one really thinks this is fair. Everybody in the building is very upset about the escalating price, which it will vary the head lease and do what it can to extend that forward over the 90 years, whereas a doubling term every 10 or line with inflation maintains the value of the ground rent over time, whereas a doubling term every 10 or
15 years can significantly increase the value—too much—over time. The Secretary of State met freeholders last year and made that clear. There should be no reason why any clause that doubles ground rent every 10 or 15 years should be enforced. I welcome the proposals from some developers and freeholders to vary clauses so leaseholders pay less ground rent.

We have been clear that variations must have consumers’ best interests at heart. We will not look kindly on those who reduce the cost of ground rents with one hand and rip off leaseholders with the other, whether through permission fees or anything else. We need a proportionate response. I want industry to take the lead and make the changes voluntarily. It is not right that hon. Members should have to highlight the sort of issues that have been raised here today.

I want to see support extended to all leaseholders with onerous ground rents, including second-hand buyers, and for customers to be proactively contacted. We will continue to work with the industry on a way forward to help existing leaseholders with onerous leases. I want to stress that leaseholders should seek impartial legal advice about potentially onerous ground rents contained in their leases. Free advice is also available from the Government’s Leasehold Advisory Service—LEASE. Leaseholders and prospective leaseholders can get advice on all aspects of leasehold properties, including ground rents, service charges and the enfranchisement process, so I urge them to take advantage of that free service. We have recently appointed a new interim chair to that organisation, and I am confident that the standard of advice that leaseholders receive will be further strengthened. Furthermore, if the leaseholder’s solicitor or conveyancer did not point out the onerous terms at the point of purchase, the leaseholder can make a complaint against them, which can be escalated to the legal ombudsman. I suggest that my hon. Friend takes that point back to his constituents.

I have also heard from leaseholders who have seen a sharp increase in the level of their service charges, often with poor value for money. Many leaseholders are unclear about their service charges, how they were calculated, and whether they are paying too much. I believe very strongly that service charges should be transparent and communicated effectively, and that there should be a clear route to challenge or redress if things go wrong. With that in mind, the Government asked Lord Best’s working group to look at service charges and consider how they should be presented for both existing and prospective consumers. I have also asked the working group to look into fees and charges that go beyond service charges, and consider the circumstances under which they are justified and whether they should be capped or banned. That includes administration charges and permission fees. I am absolutely clear that we must see an end to leaseholders being charged excessive and unfair fees. I am following the working group’s progress with keen interest. I look forward to receiving Lord Best’s report in July, and I will be meeting him shortly.

I hope that my remarks demonstrate the Government’s strong commitment to supporting existing and future leaseholders. Although this debate has been on a specific practice in the leasehold sector, it is clearly a wide-ranging area that is in need of reform. The Government will introduce measures to deliver that reform. The work that is under way makes that commitment clear. Although successive Governments have left that work unfinished, we are just getting started. Nothing, including legislation, is off the table. In that spirit, I thank my hon. Friend for his speech and questions, and I look forward to pushing ahead with our programme of leasehold reform.

Question put and agreed to.

11.23 am

Sitting suspended.
Future of DFID

[Ms Nadine Dorries in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of the Department for International Development.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Dorries. I have secured this debate because of deep concerns about the future of the Department for International Developments and its funding, and threats to our proud tradition as a distributor of aid to the most impoverished places on the planet.

Today, I seek cast-iron guarantees from the Minister that my fears are misplaced, that we will continue to make our full contribution of 0.7% of our national income to the world’s poorest communities, and that we will continue to address the deep scars of poverty and inequality that disfigure our world—the legacy of centuries of colonialism, wars, and unequal and unjust distribution of the world’s resources. We must continue to consider ourselves internationalists—brothers and sisters with the peoples of the world—not narrow isolationists, cowering behind our drawbridge.

The Department for International Development has a proud history. As right hon. and hon. Members will know, it began as a separate Ministry under Harold Wilson's Labour Government in 1964. Wilson appointed Barbara Castle as the first ever Minister in charge of overseas aid—a reflection of his own internationalism and humanitarian beliefs—which then moved in and out of the control of the Foreign Office, depending on who was in Government.

Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath put overseas aid under the control of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 1970, before Wilson once again returned its independence in 1974. Margaret Thatcher downgraded it to an agency again in 1979 until finally, under Tony Blair in 1997, it became a full Department with a Cabinet-level Minister. It is to the credit of the coalition Government elected in 2010 that that cycle of upgrading and downgrading was halted, with DFID remaining part of the machinery of government, and that its budget was maintained despite deep cuts to the rest of Whitehall. Perhaps that shows how effective the work of DFID is, and how established and respected it has become, in Britain and around the world.

Some notable politicians have been at its helm. I mentioned the formidable Barbara Castle, but no less formidable were Clare Short, Judith Hart, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), and on the Conservative side, I should mention Chris Patten and Baroness Chalker. The first ever black Cabinet-level Minister was he and former Prime Minister David Cameron who ensured that DFID stayed under a Conservative-led Government. As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, DFID had been downgraded under previous Conservative Governments, but that time, it was not.

Mr Dhesi: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I had only reached 2003, and was coming gradually to the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), but he makes a valid point. That is why I congratulate the coalition Government on their tremendous decision to keep DFID as a separate Department.

DFID works in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Iraq, Malawi, Nepal, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Sierra Leone, Syria, Tanzania, Yemen and Zimbabwe, to name but a handful. It tackles gender inequality, helps to build health and education systems, and works with communities shattered by war, genocide or famine. It is respected and admired in all the places that it operates, some of which are the hardest places to reach for other organisations.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. He has quite rightly drawn attention to the good work that has been done, with our 0.7% commitment, in the countries that he listed. Does he agree that we must continue to be extremely vigilant? In a small number of those countries—particularly on the continent of Africa—corruption is rife, and many people in the United Kingdom have concerns that some of that money is not going to those who would benefit most from it.

Mr Dhesi: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. We must ensure that aid reaches those who need it most and that it is not siphoned away by corrupt individuals in Governments, whether in Africa or in other parts of the world.

DFID is respected and admired in all the places where it operates. Wherever the UK aid logo appears, it shows the world how much the British public care. Since the passage of the International Development Act 2002, all overseas aid must be spent with the explicit purpose of reducing global poverty. That is an important piece of legislation, because it makes clear the distinction between aid and trade: one is not a quid pro quo for the other. The Pergau dam scandal showed that some aid in the 1980s and 1990s was being linked to trade deals. In that instance, despite clear objections from civil servants, there was a link between British aid for building the dam and British arms sales to Malaysia.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend mentions a very troubling incident and he is right. That is why I was just about to mention that, but I concur fully with his view.

The Pergau dam affair was declared unlawful in a landmark court case in 1994. More recently, as my hon. Friend says, fears have been raised that our aid budget has not focused solely on poverty reduction. An article...
in *The Guardian* revealed that charities such as Oxfam, Save the Children and ActionAid were deeply concerned that some of the funds were used by “classing politically convenient projects as aid.” rather than exclusively helping the most vulnerable. We must of course contribute vital overseas aid owing to our obligations as one the wealthiest nations in the world. I am sure that the Minister will offer warm and emollient words. She will no doubt tell us of the commitment to DFID as a Department and that the 0.7% target remains in place.

At this point, it is pertinent to pay tribute to both the former Liberal Democrat MP Michael Moore, for introducing a private Member’s Bill to enshrine the 0.7% target in law, and the then Government for allowing it to become law. We should welcome the commitment in the 2017 Conservative manifesto to maintaining that 0.7% commitment, which I am sure the Minister will mention in her speech.

Why exactly should we be concerned about DFID’s future? The tectonic plates of politics have shifted in recent months and the voices that considered overseas aid a waste of money have become louder and more mainstream within the governing party—the critics are moving from the fringe to centre stage. The former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), seemed more aligned with the TaxPayers Alliance than with the global anti-poverty movement. She resigned after running errands for the FCO in Israel rather than running her own Department.

The previous Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), called the establishment of DFID in 1997 “a colossal mistake”. This month, he endorsed a report by the Henry Jackson Society that calls for a dilution of DFID’s role in alleviating poverty, with a diversion towards broader international policies such as peacekeeping. He told the BBC’s “Today” programme:

“We could make sure that 0.7% is spent more in line with Britain’s political commercial and diplomatic interests.”

Commercial interests? What could he possibly mean by that?

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) has made it clear that he believes this is the opening act in a move to downgrade DFID and to slash overseas aid. It is hard to disagree that that is the Secretary of State’s secret agenda.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): On that “Today” programme, it was telling that no Minister was put up to defend the Department or to shoot down such ideas. To me, that suggests complicity with the idea itself.

Mr Dhesi: That is precisely why I and others of like mind applied for and secured this debate. We are concerned about the lack of leadership in the Government, or of Government members saying “We do not agree with that.” I will elaborate on that shortly.

We are rightly concerned that UK aid and the Department with the primary responsibility for spending it are under threat, or will be diverted from the alleviation of poverty and into being linked to trade. Today, will the Minister go beyond the same old stock phrases committing the Government to the continued existence of DFID and the 0.7% target, and instead give us some cast-iron guarantees?

First, will the Minister distance herself absolutely from the comments made by the former Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip, about the future of DFID? Secondly, will she guarantee that any review of DFID’s departmental policy post-Brexit will in no way undermine, downgrade, obfuscate or dilute the commitments enshrined in the International Development Act 2002 and the International Development (Official Development Assistance Target) Act 2015? Thirdly, will she guarantee that her party will enter the next election with a manifesto commitment to maintain, as a minimum, the existing levels of expenditure on overseas aid, with the aim of eradicating poverty and tackling gender inequality? The Minister has an open goal; will she settle the issue once and for all?

Finally, I am sure that we all stand united in our gratitude to the staff of DFID, whether they are freezing in the mountains of Tajikistan or sweltering in the heat of Mozambique, or are in the offices at Abercrombie House or just up the road at 22 Whitehall. We offer them our thanks—they are truly the best of British.

2.42 pm

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on securing this debate and on his very good speech.

No Department should feel that it is there in perpetuity—Departments have to justify their existence, and changes come from time to time. I therefore make no criticism of those who argue that such matters should be reviewed, but I am in the Chamber today to make it clear that the existence and role of DFID have been settled, and should remain settled. Mercifully, I think DFID’s role was settled in the time of Michael Howard, when he was leader of the Conservative party, and by David Cameron, both in Opposition and in Government. We made it clear that we strongly supported the decision of the then Labour Government to set up the Department for International Development. Since then, everything that DFID has done has justified those decisions.

Development is very long-tail; it is different from the disciplines of foreign policy. Tony Blair, I think, used to say that just as the Foreign Office was extremely good at prose and not at numbers, DFID was very good at numbers, but not necessarily at prose. Development is very long-tail; it is different from Foreign Office disciplines, and I used to tease diplomats when I had some responsibility for such matters by saying that they thought that development was the favourite charity of the ambassador’s spouse. That, however, is not development; development is not building schools, but ensuring that when a teacher retires there is someone to replace that teacher in his or her role.

DFID had teething problems as a new Department. From time to time, it stuck out in the Whitehall archipelago as a bit of a sore thumb; sometimes, it looked like a well-upholstered charity moored off the coast of Whitehall. Those difficulties, however, were dealt with and addressed by the time the Department came of age under the coalition Government. The National Security Council,
which wired together development, defence and development, clearly brought DFID into the Whitehall constellation—it has never looked back.

Sometimes, we can become inward-facing, focusing our own problems, so we should be clear that DFID is respected around the world as the most effective organ of development policy. It is a world leader and, as I used to say, just as America is a military superpower, so Britain is a development superpower. British academia, ideas and development policy, and Britain’s brilliant international charities and non-governmental organisations, show real world leadership. Today, many people talk about global Britain and Britain post-Brexit. I would argue that Britain’s exercise of soft power—the Government’s work in development led by DFID—is a compelling part of what global Britain means: some might say it was the only aspect of global Britain.

To focus directly on DFID, it is no surprise to find that the Department has attracted to leadership roles some of the most effective civil servants and public servants Britain can boast. There have, I think, been four permanent secretaries: Suma Chakrabarti, who is now head of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and highly respected; Minouche Shafik, who became deputy head of the International Monetary Fund and deputy governor of the Bank of England, and is today director of the London School of Economics; Sir Mark Lowcock, with unrivalled experience and now Britain’s lead official at the United Nations, in charge of the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs; and, today, Matthew Rycroft, formerly the UK’s permanent representative at the UN.

When I left university, people who wanted to go into public service went first and foremost to the Treasury and the Foreign Office; my equivalents today want to go to DFID or the Treasury. The Department exercises a powerful appeal. I am always keen to say that this is not an area of policy that is Labour or Conservative; it is an area that is British. We should all, whatever party we are from, be very proud of the work that Britain does in development. In that spirit, it would be wrong not to mention Clare Short who, in my opinion, although she and I are polar opposites politically, did an absolutely outstanding job in setting up DFID. The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) and Valerie Amos, Baroness Amos, were both outstanding Secretaries of State who drove forward that British agenda with such effectiveness.

I will make a final point. I am incredibly proud to have served in a Government that, notwithstanding the austerity then in place in Britain, declined to balance the books on the backs of the poorest people in the world or in Britain, and stood by the commitment to the 0.7%. Although Labour Governments had talked about the 0.7% for many years, it was a Conservative-led coalition Government who introduced it. The hon. Member for Slough, who led the debate, was good enough to make that point clear.

Our commitment is not only to the 0.7%, however, but to the rules. That is the point that came out in the “Today” interview that has been mentioned, in which I had a walk-on part. If we lose the rules, we can forget about the 0.7% because it will be plundered by stronger Departments such as the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office. We must not forget that a large part of the Foreign Office budget is paid for from the official development assistance DFID budget, because much of what it does is eligible under the rules—but the rules have to be kept. My comment on that “Today” programme, which I repeat, is about my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson). We all know his views, but on DFID he is in the role of a medieval pirate whose eye has alighted on a plump Spanish galleon, laden with the gold and silver of the development budget. He wants to board it and plunder it. I understand that but, nevertheless, it is wrong.

The rules are therefore probably more important than the 0.7% figure, although both go together. They are hugely to the credit of Britain and of our generations. We should be immensely proud, and we should use this debate to celebrate the effectiveness and brilliant world leadership of this great Department.

2.49 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the contributions from the Members who spoke before me—generally, I agreed with what they said.

In my role on the International Development Committee I get to see some of the fantastic projects we are doing around the world, whether supporting M-KOPA, which is a solar power scheme in Uganda, Kenya and the wider region, investments via DFID alone and working with CDC Group, or garment workers providing safety and education in Bangladesh after that awful tragedy only a few years ago. DFID and British aid lead the world not only in transforming lives but in ensuring that the goods we receive in Britain are safe and help people around the world. It is right to say this is the best of British.

I begin by discussing why we have a moral responsibility to show leadership in development. Three months after becoming Britain’s first Secretary of State for International Development, Clare Short said: “Out of our complex history—all the bad and good of it, and the role it leaves us with on the international stage—I want us to do all we can to mobilise the political will for poverty elimination.”—[Official Report, 1 July 1997; Vol. 297, c. 126.]

Of course, “our complex history” is a reference to hundreds of years in which UK foreign policy was literally designed to extract the wealth of poor countries, although not so poor at the time, around the world under our Empire or under other spheres of British influence. It is therefore a reference to our duty to pay some of that back and to the post-colonial days of tied aid; we have already heard about the Pergau dam scandal where £200 million of UK aid went to Malaysia to buy billions of pounds of weapons. That complex history is why Labour united aid by scrapping the aid and trade provision, why we passed the International Development Act 2002 and why Labour established the stand-alone Department.

The Cameron Government must be applauded for continuing the Department and breaking the previous tit for tat. But I am afraid that this Government are wilfully unlearning past lessons, to ally not the majority of the Conservative party but a lunatic fringe of their own party—including a “pirate”, according to the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell). That fringe is against the 0.7% and the rules-based system. It
is undoing the good that the coalition and Cameron Governments did following the good that the Labour Government did.

Over the course of this Parliament, aid spent outside DFID has tripled—something the cross-party International Development Committee has criticised. Most of that money is channelled through organisations such as the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund, which is constituted of many dubious programmes by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defence, often based on training and equipping militaries rather than alleviating poverty or creating long-term peace.

Mr Mitchell: Surely, it does not matter who spends the money, but that it is spent in accordance with the rules as well as it can be. If it appears that it is not spent as well as it could be, the Independent Commission for Aid Impact is the right vehicle to find that out. It does not matter who spends it; what matters is that it is spent well and within the rules of ODA.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I agree that ICAI has a key responsibility. Last year, ICAI—the Government watchdog—said that aid spent through the CSSF could not be proved not to be making the problem worse. I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that we need scrutiny, but if the money is spent by many Departments, there is not one head to be held politically accountable. The Government can spend it where they want, but the political responsibility must be with the Department, otherwise the expertise and the political responsibility are gutted from the Department. That was the case with CSSF, which cannot prove that it is not making the situation worse.

Things were already bad enough, but they have been made considerably worse by the Secretary of State feathering her leadership ambitions and sending signals to Tory Members rather than focusing on poverty alleviation. We need look no further than her recent speeches; even senior civil servants in her own Department cannot identify any of the changes in policy from those speeches. In recent months, her office has said that our speeches will not be allowed to go over that limit; unfortunately, it will take time away from the debate. Anybody who opposes imposing a five-minute limit on speeches is not in accordance with the rules as well as it can be. If it appears that it is not spent as well as it could be, the Independent Commission for Aid Impact is the right vehicle to find that out. It does not matter who spends it; what matters is that it is spent well and within the rules of ODA.

We have heard that CDC profits should be counted as aid, which in anyone’s book is double counting and is against the rules-based system. We have even heard threats of leaving the Development Assistance Committee if it does not accord to all our demands. Finally, there was nothing but silence when another leadership contender, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), backed a plan to decimate DFID and the Department for International Trade—a barmy proposal backed by the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip. In no terms is that aid spending.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I agree that ICAI has a key responsibility. Last year, ICAI—the Government watchdog—said that aid spent through the CSSF could not be proved not to be making the problem worse. I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that we need scrutiny, but if the money is spent by many Departments, there is not one head to be held politically accountable. The Government can spend it where they want, but the political responsibility must be with the Department, otherwise the expertise and the political responsibility are gutted from the Department. That was the case with CSSF, which cannot prove that it is not making the situation worse.

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Was the Minister reconsidering the rejection of our request?

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I very much welcome this debate, and I thank the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) for his excellent remarks. Like
the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), I had the pleasure of serving on the International Development Committee. In my seven years on the Committee, I saw the great role that is being done by many countries by DFID staff and by organisations that are financed by the Department. I pay tribute to them, because they put themselves on the line, sometimes at great risk. They sometimes even pay the ultimate price for their work in development.

I am a great supporter of the Department for International Development, for the reasons that my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) put forward. I am a firm believer in the 0.7% target. I stress the importance of long-term projects. I was delighted by the establishment of the small grants fund. That needs to be expanded, because it brings our constituents right into play with what is happening on the ground and enables them to see that their work in support of local charities is supported by the UK Government. Finally, DFID is very good at data, but it needs to do an awful lot more. We need to ensure that all action is data driven.

There is so much more I want to say but not enough time to say it, so let me say in conclusion that DFID is an excellent Department. Of course there is much more that can be done, including more scrutiny, and there are times when the work is not good enough, but the answer is not to abolish the Department. The answer is to strengthen it, to scrutinise it and to ensure it does the job it was set up to do—to relieve poverty.

3.5 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to support my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), whom I commend for securing this debate. He and my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) rightly criticised the Secretary of State’s effort to get the rules on development assistance changed. She seeks to undermine rules that have rightly forced Governments around the world, including ours, to be held to account for the amount of development assistance they give the world’s poorest people. It was good to hear the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) make a similar point. I take credit for much of his success as Secretary of State, because I schooled him while he was in training as the shadow Secretary of State.

There are three compelling arguments both for Britain sticking to its 0.7% level of funding for international development assistance, and for retaining the Department for International Development. First, there is a moral argument. We are one of the richest nations in the world. Surely we have a responsibility to help those in other countries who, through no fault of their own, live in terrible circumstances.

Secondly, it is surely in our country’s interests to try to support countries around the world in becoming stable, so their populations do not have to flee either to our country or to neighbouring countries. We should help them become stable so that their economies can grow, and they can have strong public services of the sort we would recognise. Given that conflict is much more likely to break out in a country where there has recently been conflict, if we continue to want to reduce the amount we spend collectively on peacekeeping, it is surely sensible to put in the hard yards by providing development assistance to help those countries get strong, effective Governments who are respected by people of all opinions.

The third argument is about soft power, which others mentioned. As a result of its huge commitment to international development, Britain is highly regarded at the United Nations. It was always highly regarded in the European Union and in a whole series of other international forums because of the work it did on development assistance, and the knowledge that everyone in the
Government was committed to maintaining and enhancing the role of the Department for International Development and the aid budget.

Arguments against spending 0.7% are being made again, predominantly by people from the right of political discourse. It is argued that charities know best. I have a lot of respect for charities, particularly Britain's charities. They make a considerable difference in the areas in which they are able to operate. However, no global player other than the Department for International Development can operate at the level that is needed to transform the poorest countries by providing aid that helps to build up the effectiveness of their Governments. Charity has a role to play, a demonstrative role in particular, and it certainly plays a useful role when a tsunami or other humanitarian crises occur, but we need to build up Governments in other countries.

Corruption is a risk, but if we use our aid money effectively, we help to strengthen the systems that stop corruption continuing to be a problem. As for the idea that charity should begin at home, every Member of the House can give examples of further Government funding being required in their constituency, and I hope we will see a change in direction when a new Government are in place, so that more resources can be made available for all of us, but I again make the point that we are one of the richest nations in the world, and we should be able to provide further development assistance.

I simply do not buy the idea that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is somehow diminished by the effectiveness of the Department for International Development. They have different roles, and they complement each other. We want a strong Foreign Office, but its strength will not be ended by an effective Department for International Development. I hope that the Secretary of State changes the language that she deploys, and that the Department's future can be guaranteed.

3.11 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Britain is an instinctively compassionate, outward-looking and humane nation, and we rightly expect our country to lend a hand in the struggle against poverty, misery and injustice; long may that continue. However, our country also has a keen sense of fairness. The British people want and expect taxpayers' money to be used with integrity, and allocated sensibly and in accordance with their international priorities. Before I look at the central tenet of the speech made by the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), it is worth considering the sums of money we are talking about; that has not yet been discussed.

The 0.7% translates to approximately £14 billion. To put that into context, I was at a meeting this morning looking at legal aid in the criminal justice system—indeed, in the overall justice system—and we spend about £1.6 billion a year on legal aid. Or what about the schools high needs block, which funds such things as special educational needs, a big issue in my constituency? Its budget is about £6 billion. Our entire prisons budget is about £4 billion. Although the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown, is right and is entitled to criticise, let us not forget the very significant sums of money allocated by this country. We can hold our heads high because we meet the commitment. The United States, France, Germany, Italy and Spain do not. This House must not fall into the trap of thinking that we are somehow skimming on our international obligations. Far from it. We stand comparison with any nation on earth. The former Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who spoke with his customary passion and eloquence, made that point crystal clear.

If we are to ensure that the British people retain their enthusiasm for meeting international commitments, it is critical that the rules be modernised and the money allocated in a way that meets priorities. Lest we forget, priorities change all the time; we must not be tone deaf to those changes. Although it is appropriate to keep a separate Department, there is a case to broaden its scope. I am delighted that the Government have acted with a great sense of purpose. I note, for example, that where the Development Assistance Committee's rules are outdated, the Government have led the way in pushing for reform, so in October 2017 the UK secured an increase in the proportion of aid spending that can be contributed to peacekeeping missions. That is perfectly understandable and reasonable, but there is one central point that we also ought to consider in this House: the Department for International Development. Is it the exclusive purview of the £14 billion budget, or are there other broad areas that we ought to consider?

When I go to schools in Cheltenham—we ought to consider the next generation—one of the key concerns about Britain's role in the world and how we want to express ourselves internationally is not so much to do with development but with conservation. The people in Charlton Kings Junior School that I spoke to are deeply concerned about plastic pollution, flora and fauna, biodiversity, habitat protection and climate change. The point that I want to make gently is that of course we must be internationalist and globalist, and we must continue to have a role in the world that shows that Britain is on the right side on the great moral issues facing our planet, but should that exclusively be about development? I think we need to have a debate in this House about whether there are other global priorities that we ought to consider.

When I see the tide of plastic in the Pacific ocean, I want us to do more. When I see species losing their habitats in sub-Saharan Africa and the hideous effects of climate change, I want to do more.

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend rightly talks about conservation, but that comes under the 0.7%, and the three things he has just mentioned are within the official development assistance rules and also come under the 0.7%, so I think I can lift his spirits a little.

Alex Chalk: To some extent it does, but cosmetic changes could be made. Why can the Department for International Development not be the Department for International Development and Conservation? That would send an important message. Also, we ought to be far clearer about the amounts that we can allocate to such causes. There is a huge amount of pushback, inevitably, from the likes of Oxfam. I understand why they would want to protect their realm, so to speak, but we could lean into these areas far more effectively; that would be more consistent with the instincts of the British people, and would gain further support.
3.16 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, Ms Dorries. I congratulate the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on securing this debate, and thank him for giving us a chance to participate. Like other Members, I add my thanks to the Department and the Minister for what they do. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) referred earlier to the soft power that DFID generates across the world.

I got a very helpful parliamentary briefing from Christian Aid, which is very active in Newtownards in my constituency. I want to pass on some of its comments, which I wholeheartedly support. Clearly, DFID is able to address many things, including the root causes of poverty: discrimination, tax avoidance, climate change, unsustainable debt and unfair trade rules. However, it cannot be forgotten or overstated that aid is vital for saving lives—DFID aid has saved lives; I reiterate that—as well as making sustainable investments for a fairer and brighter future.

It is estimated that UK aid saves a life every two minutes, for less than a penny in every pound. Between January 2015 and December 2017 alone, UK aid supported the immunisation of approximately 37.4 million children, saving 610,000 lives. If we ever needed a reason for DFID, the best reason I can think of is that it saves lives. Over the past 30 years, we have seen impressive progress on global poverty. Our Minister, her Department and our Government can take some credit for that, and I support what they do. It is nice to see the Minister back in her place. She seems to be as regular in Westminster Hall, as am I—and, indeed, the rest of us.

The UK has led many of the international responses to humanitarian crises across the world, providing life-saving health services, food, clean water and sanitation to those in need. The UK—with the support of all parties, rightly—has been first to help those affected by earthquakes and tsunamis. Christian Aid believes that Britain's commitment to providing effective aid is a badge of honour worthy of pride and fierce defence, and I agree; long may it continue. There has been some negative publicity about the 0.7% of GDP, but there is still strong public support for international development. I see that every year in my constituency when Christian Aid engages with the general public to ensure that money is raised. The people of Newtownards and Strangford are very generous every year.

As to possible changes, such as the merging of DFID with the FCO, I must express concern. In 2017, the independent Institute for Fiscal Studies concluded that poverty reduction in the world's poorest countries is at risk of being diluted by the Government’s increasing scrutiny of Government spending, with oversight (Mr Campbell), who is not in his place.

The National Audit Office and the Independent Commission for Aid Impact. There is international recognition that the UK leads in the shaping of the global development agenda, and the Department for International Development scores highly on the international aid transparency index. I see many reasons to continue to support DFID as it is. I would consider a decision to take money away from a Department that meets the gold standard to be wrong, and I urge the Minister and the Government to stand firm to ensure that it continues to do what it does—saving lives, addressing global poverty, ensuring that immunisation programmes can continue, and helping with sanitation and water quality. Many Members have spoken in the debate, and those still to speak will cover similar issues. Those things are important; my constituents want them to be dealt with, and the House should support that.

3.21 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries, and to go where the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) has taken us in this debate. I am thrilled to be sitting next to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who has done so much work in the field of international development.

The key statistic for me is that it is estimated that for less than a penny in every pound, UK aid saves a life every two minutes. When it comes to value for money, the DFID budget is more important than many others, because it has such an impact. That is what brings me here, to stand up for DFID. I take the point made that it feels as if there has been a change of tone in the past couple of years. There has always been negativity and criticism about aid being sent abroad. We should make the case for what it does for the people of this planet, and what it does for our country. It is essential to stand up for a Department that spends money well. Interestingly, in the recent transparency index, out of almost 50 countries—and, in our case, two Departments—DFID scored third for value for money, which is “very good”.

The Foreign Office’s score level was “poor”; it was pretty much towards the end of the list. As a Conservative who values the concept of getting good value for money, why would I want money to be taken from a Department that spends it well and to go to a Department that has been spending it poorly?

I had a meeting at the FCO to discuss attempts to have one Minister across both Departments, and questions were asked about why the Foreign Office had got things wrong. DFID has often been beaten for mistakes, and in some of the stories that the Daily Mail has been so fond of, when the projects in question were not DFID’s, but the Foreign Office’s. The answer to the question was that whereas DFID has a ministerial requirement to go through every spend above £250, in the Foreign Office, officials have that remit. There is not the same ministerial oversight, so I can see why issues may arise. However, I believe that almost a third of the UK overseas aid budget will be spent outside DFID by 2020, and it is that creep that causes me concern, because I want our money to be spent well, and to save the 610,000 lives that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned in connection with immunisation. That is what DFID does, whereas the Foreign Office has to
focus its attempts on diplomacy and other key areas. When it comes to spending aid money, I believe that DFID is the Department that should do it.

I have travelled with DFID officials and charity aid partners to see how the money is spent, and have been very impressed. When I first went to Jordan and the Syrian border to see whether our money was spent well, and to see different approaches, it was with an open mind. I was incredibly impressed by DFID’s work with international partners that deal with distribution on the ground, and with partners within Government. The Jordanian Government are a classic example; they are hosting 600,000 refugees in a relatively peaceful country, propped up by a lot of aid from this country. Other countries in Europe took the view that they would take migration, but the people we met did not want to come to Europe. They wanted to stay in their country—or, I should say, go back to Syria when it is safe to do so. It is UK aid that is keeping them well. The sanitation I saw was heart-warming compared with what I thought it would be. When I compare what I saw at Sangatte in France with what we are helping countries such as Jordan to deliver, it fills me with pride at being British.

I recently went to Africa. In response to the point made by the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) about our colonial past, I would issue a warning that it is the Chinese who are now doing what he described happening in Africa. Perhaps that is where the Foreign Office could intervene—by putting more pressure on China not to take from countries, treating them almost as a back office to China, but to put something into them. The corruption that is going on in Africa is a disgrace. However, I was heartened by the fact that in Djibouti, where 40% of the population are children, the mortality rate has halved as a result of UK aid helping our partners on the ground. There is much that we do, and we do it well. In April, I am going to Iraq to see what is being done.

I absolutely support the Minister in her post. I look forward to DFID continuing in its role, and to all of us standing up to champion what it can do, and pushing back on those voices that, I am afraid to say, do not always have its best interests at heart.

3.26 pm

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I congratulate the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on securing the debate. The topic is incredibly important. A challenge for MPs is the fact that it is sometimes a hard sell with our constituents. Often they do not see the results of what is done; they just hear about the money going in at the front end. They do not see what good comes of it.

I must admit that I was slightly sceptical when I was elected in 2015, but subsequently I was appointed a Parliamentary Private Secretary in DFID—on two occasions. First I assisted the ministerial team—or un-assisted them, depending on how you looked at it. Afterwards, I worked with the Secretary of State. I saw at first hand the complete and utter dedication of the Secretary of State, the ministerial team and the civil servants who helped to pull the whole thing together. Those people have great pride in what they do and the way they deliver it. They are delivering life-saving changes around the world.

I disagree with some comments by Opposition Members that the Secretary of State does not care as much as previous Secretaries of State. I have seen at first hand that she absolutely does. I was struck in my first meetings in the Department by her insistence that it was important to prove not only that money was being spent well, but that it could not be spent better. That is a critical point that we should always have at the forefront of our mind. In January 2018, she set out five pledges, which included a proposal for boosting trade and investment with developing countries, helping developing countries to stand on their own feet with sustainable health and education systems in which they invest, and finding ways to help other Departments make their spend more effective. There is a commitment to deliver on those things.

I want to make two quick points, relating to my earlier comment about our constituents not always necessarily understanding the importance of the Department. We are talking about huge sums of money, billions. It is worth reminding the House and our constituents of some of the things that DFID helps to deliver. Between April 2015 and March 2018 it reached 26.8 million people with humanitarian assistance and supported 11.4 million children in getting a decent education. It also supported 40.3 million people in accessing clean water and better sanitation. Since 2015, UK aid paid for more than 37 million children to be immunised, saving more than 600,000 lives across the world—the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised that point.

As I said earlier this week during Second Reading of the Children Act 1989 (Amendment) (Female Genital Mutilation) Bill, DFID has supported programmes to help more than 8,000 communities—representing more than 24.5 million people—who pledged to abandon FGM and let more than 3 million women and girls get FGM protection and care services. Those things are being delivered around the world as we speak.

We should not underestimate the benefits of soft power because, as colleagues have said, that is why we are respected around the world. That is not because of our football teams—certainly not my football team, Newcastle—our pop music industry or our cars, but because we are known to be a reliable partner that is there to help less fortunate countries when they need that support. As the world’s fifth largest economy, we have a responsibility to help those countries, but that help also benefits Britain. By investing at source, problems are less likely to escalate and become more difficult, or perhaps to end up on our shores, meaning that we have to deal with those issues here, thereby putting pressure on other services. Work to prevent conflict, disease and disasters helps make this country more secure, and for those reasons I am very proud of DFID’s work. It is important that DFID remains a standalone Department, not only so that it can continue to deliver services, but so that the quality and oversight of what is being delivered receives the best possible scrutiny.

Several hon. Members rose—
Ms Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Order. We have gone slightly over time so I would be grateful if Front-Bench speakers kept their speeches to nine minutes.

3.31 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. It is a rare experience for me to be in Westminster Hall these days, but I am delighted to speak about the Department for International Development. Once upon a time I was the SNP spokesperson for international development, and our current spokesperson, my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), is currently attending the International Development Committee—this debate has slightly unfortunate timing because I know the Committee is hearing important evidence, but it is good that some of its members have made it here today.

I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on securing this important and timely debate, and I agreed with practically every word he said, just as I agreed with other Labour Members and more broadly across the Chamber—there has been a fair degree of consensus today, which is positive. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) defended the Department for International Development and the 0.7% target, and if the Government’s confidence and supply partners are keen on DFID, I think its safety is secured for the foreseeable future. We look forward to hearing from the Minister—she will also bring a bit of gender balance to the debate, as there has not been much of that. By way of an informal declaration of interest, I serve on the board of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy on behalf of the SNP, and I chair the all-party group on Malawi.

In the short time available—we want to hear from the Minister—I wish to reflect on some of the things we have heard and offer some perspectives from Scotland. In opening the debate, the hon. Member for Slough gave a good overview of DFID’s history, particularly of its achievements in its current incarnation. DFID was one achievement of the new Labour Government, and for all the faults that some of us might have seen during those years, the establishment of the Department and its continuation has been a significant achievement. The United Kingdom played a huge role in the establishment and delivery of the millennium development goals, and it has gone on to do the same with the sustainable development goals. Again, we should give credit where it is due and to the role of the coalition Government in drafting the SDGs, under the leadership of the then Prime Minister, David Cameron. However, writing down goals on a piece of paper is one thing, but ensuring they are delivered is another, and that responsibility must be maintained by the Department.

DFID is one of the most scrutinised Departments, and as the former SNP spokesperson on international development I regularly took part on debates on aid spending—I know such debate continue to occur. We have the Independent Commission for Aid Impact, the International Development Committee, and there are all kinds of mandatory reporting mechanisms. It is perhaps no wonder that, as the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) said, stories end up in the Daily Mail, precisely because there is so much scrutiny—far more than for some other Departments.

Such scrutiny leads to a mismatch in public perception. According to opinion polls, analysis and focus groups, the public seem to think that not 0.7%, but closer to 7% or even 10% of national income is spent on aid. The perception is different from the reality, and when people see first-hand and understand the impact that aid is making, attitudes change—that point was emphasised very personally by the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey). As the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) said, the small grants scheme is an important and welcome innovation, and for many years the Scottish Government have used their budget to allow that localised connection.

The amount of money spent on aid is about one tenth of spending on the health service. We spent £2 billion a year on Trident, and multiples of that on arms sales—that issue was raised by the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk). If money was diverted from that sort of spending, it could well complement the relatively small amounts that still go on aid. Importantly—this theme has come out of today’s debate—DFID must maintain its role as the lead Department, and we must recognise the importance of investing in the long term.

There is a proper debate to be had about quality versus quantity, and although it can be difficult to measure the long-term impact of aid programmes, that does not mean they do not have an impact, or that years down the line it will not be clear that the investments have paid off in the long term because cultures, habits and attitudes have changed. That is why investing in monitoring and evaluation is important—it is part of delivery, and part of what the spending is for. Recent Secretaries of State have attempted to cut bureaucracy or reduce some of DFID’s spending, and that is when we end up with money that has to be shovelled out the door and it is perhaps not monitored as effectively as possible. We must get right the balance between quality and quantity.

Since 2005, the Scottish Government—again on a cross-party basis—have run a small international development programme, and they continue to prioritise human rights, sustainable development goals, global citizenship, and a concept of ultimately moving beyond aid. There will always be a need for aid in some shape or form, but ultimately we need an holistic approach across the Government. Part of the point of the sustainable development goals is that global vision of how to achieve a better, more sustainable planet for everybody. We must implement those goals here in the United Kingdom, as well as ensuring that they are implemented effectively in developing countries.

In Scotland we sometimes hear that DFID is one of the United Kingdom’s great assets, and a reason why Scotland should not consider embarking on its own constitutional independence. If DFID is to be undermined, and if we are to be told that the aid budget needs to be scrapped and is not effective—perhaps people should be a little careful about the logic of that argument if we in Scotland want to maintain our role as global citizens. That is why the rhetoric that we hear from Ministers about aid working in the national interest must be questioned.

I have never understood—no Minister has ever been able to tell me—how achieving the sustainable development goals, eradicating poverty, and ending the impact of climate change is not in the national interest. It is in our
collective interest as human beings to meet those development goals, and we should not need to try to make some sort of distinction. It is correct to have these debates and for DFID to be properly scrutinised, but the immediate context of this debate is worrying. As the hon. Member for Slough said, the Government must immediately distance themselves from the report by the Henry Jackson Society, and say that that is not their direction of travel.

The metaphor of pirates cruising around looking for galleons filled with gold is slightly unhelpful, because the amounts of money we are talking about are not vast, and the returns that we get from them vastly outstrip that investment. Finally, I say to people who think they can undermine the aid budget that there is a majority in this House and in this country who support the work of DFID. The people who campaigned, marched and lobbied for the Jubilee Campaign, the Trade Justice Movement and Make Poverty History have not gone away. They will use their voices and votes to stand up for the poorest and most marginalised around the country and the world. They can be assured of the SNP’s support and, I believe, the support of the majority of Members in the House.

3.40 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) for securing this important debate. It is a shame that Members feel that they have to bring such debates to the House, when we thought we had settled the matter of the Department for International Development, as has been said over and over again today.

It is a pleasure to follow so many assured and supportive speeches, the majority of which gave total support for the future work of the Department for International Development, and to follow the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell). The hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) gave an excellent speech; he does a lot of important work with the World Bank on behalf of this House. The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) gave an outstanding speech that showed that if we look at this matter independently and objectively there is no question about the need for the independence of the Department, the 0.7% and all the arguments that he went through. On my own side, I follow the former Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), and my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), who is a member of the International Development Committee.

In 1997, when Labour established the Department for International Development, Clare Short, the first Secretary of State for International Development, told the House of Commons that her Department had been given the most noble and honourable work that anyone could be asked to do.”

She said that eliminating global poverty, while “both...affordable and...achievable”, was also “the single greatest challenge the world faces.”—[Official Report, 1 July 1997; Vol. 297, c. 116.]

In the two decades since then, politicians from across the political spectrum have ensured that this country steps up to that challenge.

The International Development Act 2002 ensures that all aid spending remains tightly focused on poverty reduction overseas and is not diverted to other ends. In 2014 Parliament improved on that and passed the International Development (Gender Equality) Act, to ensure the associated challenge of discrimination against, and oppression of, women and girls. In 2015 Parliament enshrined in law the commitment to spend 0.7% of national income on overseas aid, making us one of only five donor countries to meet the internationally agreed commitment.

Since DFID was established 22 years ago, it has become a global leader in international development. Every year it spends UK aid in ways that make tangible differences to people’s lives the world over. DFID has helped some of the world’s poorest people realise their right to health and education. It has provided emergency aid—life-saving aid for people caught up in major humanitarian crises and has led the way in bringing gender equality into the mainstream through its development work. The UK public should be proud of the development work that their money has supported over recent decades, but all too sadly they do not hear the success stories of UK aid and the work of DFID. Instead, they hear a loud and vocal anti-aid lobby, which does its best to discredit the work, as many Members today have mentioned.

The charge against the country’s aid programme is spearheaded by a small number of major media outlets, who revel in spinning and stirring the few occasions when UK aid programmes might not have worked as we had hoped. They are hell bent on driving a hysterical hatred of the UK’s work to end global poverty. The anti-aid media narrative is a serious problem, but even more worrying are attacks from a number of Tory Ministers, which have many guises. I will mention three of them.

First, there is the straightforward misspending and diverting of aid away from poverty reduction. Last weekend the Guardian reported a letter sent to the Chancellor from 23 international development agencies, raising their concerns about the way Ministers are spending aid. They warned him that aid is being diverted away from the poorest countries in order to promote commercial and political interests. From using aid to help UK companies expand their businesses overseas, to suggestions that aid be spent on UK naval ships, we are seeing more aid than ever being spent on projects that no one sincerely believes are about reducing global poverty. Those attempts do nothing but feed into the idea that the UK aid programme is a waste of UK taxpayers’ money.

Secondly, there are blatant attempts to dissolve the Department altogether. It is no secret that the former Foreign Secretary wants to see the Department dismantled. Earlier this month, he threw his weight behind a report that said DFID should be folded back into the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and that the UK’s aid budget should be slashed. Such a move would be a disaster for the country’s aid programme. It is only DFID that has the specific and sole purpose of poverty alleviation and a dedicated staff working to achieve this goal. Merging the Department with the FCO—or any other Department
for that matter—would dilute the agenda and see more money diverted away from poverty towards other foreign policy interests.

We can learn from Australia, where the international development department was merged with the foreign office, with a number of negative knock-on effects. The country’s strategic vision for aid was lost, the Government witnessed a brain-drain of development expertise and an estimated 2,000 years of collective experience left the department.

We already know from our own experience, where almost one third of our aid is spent outside DFID, that only DFID meets the highest spending standards. The Aid Transparency Index, the only independent measure of aid transparency among the world’s major development agencies, rated DFID “very good”, while the FCO’s aid spending was rated “poor”, according to the same measure. Likewise, the ONE Campaign recently launched an aid index that rates aid spending by different Departments. It found the FCO to be “weak” on its ability to keep aid focused on poverty, and that no other Department spends aid as well as DFID.

The third threat, which is related, is the worrying challenge to our aid and development work presented by the persistent undermining of the very concept of aid. The Secretary of State has made clear her desire to change the definition of aid. She recently launched a consultation on her plans to reduce the amount of public money that needs to be spent on aid by counting profits from private investments towards the aid budget. There are no two ways about it—aid is either spent to alleviate poverty and the causes of poverty, or it is invested to make a profit. The Labour party rejects any attempts to commercialise the UK aid budget.

The Secretary of State has said that she thinks the 0.7% of aid spending is unsustainable. Will the Minister expand on that comment, which was reported to have been made in a Cabinet meeting? We know that the Secretary of State wants to rewrite the international rules set by the OECD that govern aid spending. In the context of the sustained threat that is faced by DFID and ODA, I am delighted this debate has been called.

Anyone who believes that this country has a role to play in international development must be ready to defend the Department and the budget. I cannot fathom why some people are so obsessed with eroding and ending aid.

Alex Chalk: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it was right for the British Government to seek to rewrite the rules to allow aid spending to be used to deal with some of the appalling consequences of the dreadful storm in British Overseas Territories? Does he agree that it was appropriate that British aid should go towards that deserving cause?

Dan Carden: As we heard from the hon. Gentleman, his earlier contributions, maintaining the focus of the 0.7% is the most important issue. If we keep trying to erode and change the definition of aid, we are not backing that concept.

It disgusts me that people put so much energy into blocking support for the world’s poorest people, when a fraction less than 1% of our country’s income is spent on aid. I am a proud internationalist and I am proud that my party was responsible for setting up the Department for International Development. I believe the country’s aid programme is about morality, justice and pragmatism. It is a shame that we are debating whether we should continue with our UK aid commitments and whether our world-renowned Department for International Development can survive many more years of Tory in-fighting, or be saved from being turned into a political football in any future leadership contest. I hope the Minister can give some guarantees on behalf of the Government.

3.49 pm

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): I congratulate the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on securing today’s debate. It is worth highlighting that we have had a range of excellent speeches, eight of which were from Conservative and Democratic Unionist party colleagues, while there are five Labour Members here. The way in which the issues were raised in the debate, and the endorsement at the Conservative manifesto at the last election, gave to the 0.7%, sets our record straight right off the bat, in terms of our commitment and our pride in being part of the movement that put 0.7% in statute—we are the only country in the world to have done that so far—and to the Government’s policy to retain the Department for International Development as a stand-alone Department. The reasons for that were well articulated by a range of Members.

I am a Minister in both the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. That makes a great deal of sense because, to highlight just one, South Sudan, of the worst humanitarian crises—where some of our biggest DFID budgets are—we can see that it is entirely a man-made conflict, and we need to work not only through providing humanitarian assistance, but by doing what we can on the political track to try to bring that conflict to a resolution. That is why it makes sense for me and the Minister for the Middle East to be in both Departments.

We have heard a range of excellent speeches, many of them focused on history and some of the lessons we have learned through history on how to do what we do more effectively. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who spoke eloquently about the role of the Department, many of the people who have served in the Department over the years, and the role of overseas development assistance in soft power and Global Britain. His characteristic modesty did not allow him to mention that he, I think, came up with “UK aid—from the British people”. That is now widely used in our projects—I saw it on an Ethiopian water tank only last week. We should pay tribute to him for that; I know Ministers would like to see more of it.

The hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) spoke about M-KOPA and CDC. I was glad to hear that, because I have not always heard a consistent message of support from Labour Members on CDC, the private sector development arm. It brings a great deal of private sector capital into development issues and M-KOPA, which he highlighted, is a particularly good example.
The Conflict, Stability and Security Fund plays an important role. I reassure colleagues that 100% of our 0.7% spending comes in a form that is approved by the Development Assistance Committee. We have pushed to change some of the rules over the years and have been successful in doing that, and my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) highlighted one of those successes. We have also been able to get the allocation for peacekeeping up from 7% to 15%. The role of the UN peacekeepers is important and the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund providing the foundation of peace and security for development is vital.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) rightly highlighted the important work that has been done through the aid budget to tackle a wide range of diseases, not just malaria and neglected tropical diseases but diseases such as polio. He spoke of the need for long-term development funding, which we do primarily through the World Bank now. He is making a powerful case for the UK to have its own bank. He rightly highlighted the importance of the Small Charities Challenge Fund and the aid match projects that allow us to match one-to-one the wishes of the British public with spending.

Gareth Thomas: The Minister will be aware of the SheDecides global movement, which supports the right of every girl and woman to make the decisions that only they should make. SheDecides Day is coming up fast. Will the Minister tell the House why the Secretary of State has not agreed to be an ambassador for the movement?

Harriett Baldwin: I cannot, because I was not aware of it, but I know that there is no one who women and girls around the world can count on more than our Secretary of State for her championing of the need to put women and girls first. It is putting women and girls first, and creating an environment where they do well, that enables the rest of the country to do well. That is vital and is incorporated in all of our programming.

The hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) also raised the issue of corruption, which is an example of where cross-Government working is so important, so that we can work with the National Crime Agency to tackle some of the financial flows and corruption that flow from some developing countries where we are spending overseas development assistance, through the UK courts and UK financial system. It is a good example of where we need to work across government.

Members discussed the fact that some other Departments spend overseas development assistance. Of course they do, for a range of things, whether that is trade, development, the work of the National Crime Agency, the work on the environment and plastics through the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, or the work that we do on tackling climate change, which needs to be joined-up across government. There was a wide outbreak of consensus on that.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised an important, underlying function: for us to save lives through what we do with aid. He was absolutely right to highlight that. My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) highlighted the importance of value for money and being able to tell the British taxpayer that we are getting it. The debate has allowed us to highlight some excellent examples of value for money.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey), who I thank for the excellent work he did as my previous Private Parliamentary Secretary—he would be welcome back any time; he just needs to support the withdrawal agreement—highlighted that it is not just that the money should be spent well, but that it could not be spent better. The hon. Members for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) and for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) also made supportive comments.

I am glad to be able to reassure hon. Members that it is indeed Government policy to continue with the excellent stand-alone work of the Department for International Development. We can point to a strong track record of delivering results. We will continue to work across Government in a joined-up way in trying to achieve the sustainable development goals by 2030. We have heard a lot about the past of the Department. The future of the Department must surely be about focusing on achieving the sustainable development goals and on spending more of our money in areas of extreme poverty.

Mr Dhesi: Will the Minister categorically say that she is against the former Foreign Secretary’s comments? Some of us are looking for the reassurance that post Brexit there will be no downgrading of our legal commitments.

Harriett Baldwin: I can give the hon. Gentleman that assurance.

3.58 pm

Mr Dhesi: I am very much heartened by the comments from the Minister, and her commitment. I am grateful to right hon. and hon. Members from both sides of the Chamber for their invaluable contributions to this very important debate and for the cross-party consensus that we have managed to maintain throughout.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the future of the Department for International Development.
4 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the role of unincorporated associations in electoral funding.

It is very good to see you in the Chair, Ms Dorries; I believe this is the first Westminster Hall debate I have participated in where you have been in the Chair.

I will introduce this somewhat obscure topic of the role of unincorporated associations in UK electoral funding by setting the scene. We begin in the Glasgow suburb of Clarkston, the type of place that is usually prefixed with “leafy”. As many hon. Members from Scottish constituencies, especially in the west, will know, it is composed of the mid-century, semi-detached houses that are a familiar sight across the west of Scotland and, I am sure, elsewhere. Anyone who has watched “Two Doors Down” on BBC Scotland might know what I am talking about.

In one of those houses lives a seemingly upstanding citizen by the name of Richard Cook, a former vice-chair of the Scottish Conservative party and former Scottish Conservative and Unionist candidate for East Renfrewshire. A cursory search turns up photos of Mr Cook with numerous Tory grandees, including the current leader of the Conservative and Unionist party in Scotland, Ruth Davidson, Member of the Scottish Parliament, and her interim replacement, Jackson Carlaw, the local MSP. There is also a photo of Mr Cook with the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, who came to East Renfrewshire to campaign for Mr Cook in 2010, in the election campaign that, as we all know, made Mr Cameron Prime Minister.

During that campaign, voters in East Renfrewshire were given an impression of a candidate in a Tory target seat who fitted the zeitgeist well—a waste management consultant who could almost have been hand-picked by Conservative campaign headquarters to represent the new, green Tories. His leaflets spoke about protecting green spaces and improving recycling.

Incredibly, during the campaign, the company that Mr Cook founded, DDR Recycling, was involved in a scam relating to the illegal shipment of waste tyres around the world, as confirmed by the Environment Agency in the UK. During investigations into those shipments, it was alleged that Mr Cook submitted false evidence to authorities in the United Kingdom and in the Republic of India investigating the case. That case is the loose thread that pulls apart the Scottish Conservative and Unionist candidate’s carefully managed public persona.

Thanks to the excellent work of investigative journalists such as Peter Geoghegan and Adam Ramsay at openDemocracy, we have been led carefully through a mystery tour of Mr Cook’s business dealings, which belied the conventional suburban milieu from which he came. DDR Recycling is now in liquidation, owing the UK taxpayer £150,000, but before that, it became embroiled in a Californian court case brought by an international haulage firm, which alleged $1.5 million of unpaid bills for waste shipments to South Korea.

That was only the beginning. Just before leaving DDR in 2014, Cook set up a company called Five Star Investment Management, with 75% of its shares held by the now late Prince Nawaf bin Abdulaziz, a former head of Saudi Arabian intelligence, and the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the United Kingdom. A third partner, a Danish national by the name of Peter Haestrup, had previously been involved in a gun-running scandal in the Republic of India. That is only a glimpse into a dazzling array of international deals, including another $1 billion environmental project in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, which looked to most trained observers like a litany of fraudulent deals.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): While my hon. Friend wets his whistle, before he moves on from the role that journalists played in exposing the Constitutional Research Council and Mr Cook’s activities, will he acknowledge the role played by Jim Fitzpatrick of BBC Northern Ireland’s documentary series, “Spotlight”? His marvellous documentary, “Brexit, Dark Money and the DUP”, began this whole investigation and should be commended.

Ms Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Order. That should be an intervention, not a speech.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Perhaps I can remind the Chamber that my hon. Friend’s name is Brendan O’Hara. I totally agree with him and commend those who have assisted in exposing dark money to the light.

Why is all that relevant to a debate about unincorporated associations in the political process? Mr Cook is the poster boy for the way in which UAs have been used to funnel vast swathes of dark money into our political process. Even worse, the Electoral Commission allows fraudsters such as him effectively to mark their own answers only one question in this debate, I would like it to be this one: why, given all the ways in which individuals and organisations can donate money to political parties, non-party campaigners, individuals in elective office such as MPs, and referendum campaigners.

The key phrase in that definition is, “which do not fall into any of the other categories of permissible donors”. That is what today’s debate is about. If the Minister answers only one question in this debate, I would like it to be this one: why, given all the ways in which individuals and organisations can donate money to political parties and groups in a transparent and straightforward manner, do we still allow this backdoor method, which seems to me to be easily exploited by those who would seek to obscure the provenance of funds?

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): My hon. Friend is giving an excellent speech. Is he surprised and disappointed, as I was, to learn that when SNP councillors lodged a motion asking Tory councils in North Ayrshire to make a statement on dark donations to local Tory branches, the Labour councillors abstained? Does he, like me, suspect that that is not unrelated to
[Patricia Gibson]

the much-denied informal confidence and supply arrangement that exists between Labour and Tory groups across Scotland?

[Martin Docherty-Hughes]

It sounds like “Better Together”.

The case that proves my argument beyond doubt is the unincorporated association that Richard Cook leads: the Constitutional Research Council, or CRC. He describes the CRC as a group “to start promoting the Union in all its...parts”, and while it is based in Scotland, critically, it has managed to spread its tentacles across the rest of these islands. The CRC is most famous—or should I say infamous?—for the £435,000 donation it made to the Democratic Unionist party during the Brexit referendum.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Not at the moment, no.

That was a vast sum for a party whose election expenses do not normally even get past five figures. Some £280,000 of that donation was spent on a wrap-around advert in the Metro newspaper in the lead-up to the Brexit referendum, despite the fact that the only part of these islands where the Metro is not distributed is the part in which the DUP itself stands.

The bizarre situation, Mr Austin—it is good to see you in the Chair, sir; perhaps you will remember folks’ names, if they are allowed an intervention—allied with the fact that the advert itself closely resembled the type of advertising promoted in the official “Vote Leave” campaign, meant that the case soon came to the attention of those investigating illegal collusion between the campaigns, including this Parliament’s own Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

While the where or why of that collusion is not relevant to the debate, the vehicle used by the campaigns as a conduit for this cash—the CRC—is. Because the CRC is an unincorporated association, it could mask the ultimate sources of those funds. I will let the Committee report say it, as it is incredible.

Colin Clark: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I will not, no. The Committee stated that “this Committee and the wider public have no way of investigating the source of the £435,000 donation to the DUP made on behalf of the CRC and are prevented from even knowing whether it came from an organisation, whose membership had either sanctioned the donation or not, or from a wealthy individual.”

This is a political donation equivalent to twice the price of the average house in most parts of these islands. It is almost 60 times greater than the £7,500 threshold for naming normal political donors, but we now absolutely nothing about its source, and the Electoral Commission cannot tell us, as elected Members in this Parliament, how it verified that it was permissible.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Will my hon. Friend give way on this point?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I will briefly, yes.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am extremely grateful. Sometimes this stuff is hiding in plain sight. The Electoral Commission figures released earlier today tell us that the Conservative party has received a total of £400,000, with one donation coming from the household of a former Putin Minister eight months after the Salisbury poisoning, which killed a British citizen, and the other one coming from a weapons dealer and gunrunner who is a personal friend of the President of Syria, Bashar al-Assad. Does my hon. Friend agree that if that money is not returned, it confirms the Tory party’s status as a complete moral sewer?

Martin Docherty-Hughes rose—

Colin Clark: On that point, will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: No, I will not. I will make it clear that I fundamentally agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), and the Minister will not be able to turn to civil servants to answer on behalf of the Conservative party, because this is purely political. Let me also make it clear that this is the exact opposite of the probity and good governance that we would expect from a properly functioning liberal parliamentary democracy. I am sure that I am not the only one to come to the same conclusion as the DCMS Committee—that the CRC used this method.

Let me quote the Committee again. It stated that “in order to avoid having to disclose the source of this £435,000 donation, the CRC, deliberately and knowingly, exploited a loophole in the electoral law to funnel money to the Democratic Unionist Party in Northern Ireland.”

I am of course disappointed not to see, for the first time ever, a member of the Democratic Unionist party at a Westminster Hall debate.

Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: No. I know that the hon. Gentleman wants to speak on behalf of the DUP, but I will not give way. I wonder how many DUP Members know what the true source of the money was and whether it did the requisite due diligence before accepting it. Why do we continue to let cowboys such as Richard Cook effectively mark their own homework? Surely there must be a way to ensure that the probity of major political donations can be assured.

Let us not forget that there is a legitimate reason for UAs to exist; it is not my intention to suggest otherwise. In a legal sense, it is understandable that certain groups may want to keep structures that have no legal existence separate from their members.

Colin Clark: On that point, will the hon. Gentleman give way?
Martin Docherty-Hughes: No. As someone who worked for many years in the third sector in my constituency, I know very well—[Interruption.] Perhaps hon. Members will listen, rather than asking for an intervention they will not get. I know very well the value of UAs to organisations that do not want to be encumbered by the bureaucracy of other statuses.

Mr Lord: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Once again, no. Political parties do this, of course. My own SNP branches—Clydebank, Dumbarton and the mighty Vale of Leven—make donations to the party, and vice versa, but the point is that they are able to do so in a transparent and accountable manner. Political parties and the sub-units therein are already, as you will know, Mr Austin, regulated as accounting units. Anyone going on to look at the list of donors to my political campaigns will know exactly where the money came from, and if it is not from an individual, people can be certain that it is from a group whose aims are well stated and well understood.

However, as we can see from the outcomes of the DCMS Committee report, donors who want to obscure the source of their donations are using unincorporated associations as a vehicle to do that. Quite simply, unincorporated associations beyond regulated political parties are a subtle legal fiction that allows fraudsters to dump dark money in our system, which is not confined to the outer reaches.

Mr Lord: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: No.

Mr Lord: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Again, no, I will not.

One moment. I think that we are all very rapidly—[Interruption.] If this is a debate, perhaps a member of the Democratic Unionist party should have been here, rather than members of the Scottish Conservative party.

Mr Lord rose—

Colin Clark rose—

Bill Grant rose—

Martin Docherty-Hughes: No. I think that we are all very rapidly—[Interruption.] If this is a debate, perhaps a member of the Democratic Unionist party should have been here, rather than members of the Scottish Conservative party.

Mr Lord: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: No. I will not at the moment. I am going to make some progress, because I know we are short of time.

Let us be quite open: news outlets such as openDemocracy and the Ferret have documented how UAs and similar legal entities designed to obscure donations have been used to flood Scottish politics with cash. During the 2016 Holyrood election campaign that saw the Scottish Tories become the official second party, hundreds of thousands of pounds were funnelled through other organisations with an illegal remit such as the Irvine Unionist Club, the Scottish Unionist Association Trust, the Scottish Conservative Club and, of course, Focus on Scotland. Indeed, during the election to this place, in which Members from the other parties were elected, several elected candidates from the Scottish Conservative party accepted donations from opaque organisations.

Quite simply, I do not think it is befitting of our political system to continue with this type of ambiguity. In 2017, all my colleagues and I stood on a manifesto to enhance the powers of the Electoral Commission and increase the punishments available to it. The manifesto stated:

“SNP MPs will support new powers for the Electoral Commission, providing them with legal authority to investigate offences under the Representation of the People Act 1983. We will also support the Electoral Commission’s call to make higher sanctioning powers available to them, increasing the maximum penalty from £20,000 to £1,500,000.”

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: No. I think that we are all very rapidly—[Interruption.] One moment. I think that we are all very rapidly becoming aware, if we were not already, that the current regulations and various pieces of legislation that police our electoral system are being tested to the absolute limit, and most certainly at the wrong time.

In learning about the activities of shysters such as Richard Cook in our own political process, I was sadly reminded of some of the characters in the recently released book “Moneyland” by the investigative journalist Oliver Bullough. In that book, we see how the unscrupulous and corrupt have used the mechanisms of international finance and regulation effectively to create a place—Moneyland—that puts them outside the normal jurisdictions that mere mortals such as ourselves must live under. One of the more upsetting aspects of the book is the way in which this city has become the clearing house par excellence for both the money and the reputations of a whole host of unsavoury characters who see the banks, the legal services and a whole range of other civil society bodies and institutions as ready and willing to help them in that regard, and do not ask too many questions about it. [Interruption.] Not at the moment.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a really powerful speech. He speaks of transparency and accountability being important and of a functioning liberal democracy being something that we should all support. Does he share my astonishment, because of course electoral support comes in forms other than hard cash, that the Prime Minister has yet to reply to my letter of 7 January about the visit of AggregateIQ to Downing Street? That follows on from her failure to write to me after Prime Minister’s questions as she said she would on 12 September.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: It does not surprise me, because the leader of the Scottish Conservative party has never even responded to my request in terms of a letter about dark money.

Mr Lord: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: No. I will not at the moment. I am going to make some progress, because I know we are short of time.
[Martin Docherty-Hughes]

Ultimately, this is what Richard Cook has done with the CRC. He has used his reputation as a former chair of the Scottish Conservatives and as a former candidate in East Renfrewshire to create the appearance of probity in the organisation, while at every turn refusing to reveal the ultimate source of its donations or even who constitutes its membership. It would be interesting to hear from the Minister whether she is happy to see the reputation of her party being used for that purpose. Although I have many profound disagreements with the Conservative party on policy, I understand that, in terms of parliamentary democracy, its reputation affects the entirety of our political system, and I cannot for the life of me understand why anyone would be happy with those realities.

Bill Grant: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: No. This Government have undoubtedly allowed that to happen to our political system, with dark money now flooding unhindered through it. Dark money is a cancer in our political system, and unincorporated associations are the most prominent way in which that cancer enters the bloodstream. It is a malignancy that works by removing transparency and confidence in the system of political funding—something that undermines trust in the political system as a whole.

Colin Clark: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: No. And we must be—

Colin Clark: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: No. We must be unflinching in our determination to root this out. As Oliver Bullough writes near the end of “Moneyland”, political parties have been guilty of accepting money when they cannot be entirely clear about the ultimate source of those donations. Whether it be the Conservatives, the Democratic Unionist party or the Vote Leave campaign, they have simply failed to do the correct due diligence. I will draw my remarks to a close with a quote from that book:

“Disapproval of these surreptitious payments should not depend on whether they are befitting your own side or not. They are inherently harmful. Without trust, liberal democracy cannot function.”

I shall recap and pose the questions that I would like the Minister to answer. Given all the ways in which individuals and organisations can donate money to political parties and groups in a transparent and straightforward manner, why do we still allow unincorporated associations, which are not political parties, to participate so freely, especially in a way that is easily exploitable by those who would seek to obscure the provenance of funds? Will the Government support the Scottish National party’s manifesto commitment to increase the sanctioning powers available to the Electoral Commission from £25,000 to £1,500,000? Will the Government do the right thing and extend the transparency rules around donations made in Northern Ireland from 2014? The cancer of dark money must be removed from our political system. I call on the entire House to join us in that process.

4.21 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): It is an absolute pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Austin. I am grateful to the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) for calling this debate, and for the contributions made by various hon. Members. I am only amazed that he took no intervention from anyone other than his friends.

Mr Lord rose—

Chloe Smith: I would be delighted to hear from my hon. Friend.

Mr Lord: I am hoping that the Minister will say that the Government will say that the Government and all political parties want to root out any wrongdoing. I came here for a Westminster Hall debate, but the sewer of accusations spewed forth by the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) is an absolute disgrace. As the Minister said, he took many interventions from his own party, but refused dozens of interventions from others. This was not a debate; it was a diatribe, and he should be ashamed of himself.

David Linden Glasgow, East (SNP): On a point of order, was there a question to the Minister in that last intervention, or was that also a diatribe?

Ian Austin (in the Chair): As far as I can see, nothing disorderly has taken place so far. The Minister can respond to Mr Lord’s question, if she wishes.

Chloe Smith: Thank you, Mr Austin.

I will set out the rules surrounding the involvement of unincorporated associations in election funding, which will be helpful in responding to the debate. These associations are included in the list of permissible donors set out in section 54 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000. The additional Political Parties and Elections Act 2009 introduced reporting rules for UAs that supported political activities; those rules are in schedule 19A of the 2000 Act.

Unincorporated associations must notify the Electoral Commission if the political contributions that they make over a calendar year are more than £25,000, whether that is through a single contribution or several. An unincorporated association must also notify the Electoral Commission of the reportable gifts that it received in the calendar year before it made the contribution, the calendar year of the contribution, and the calendar year following the contribution. That information is published by the Electoral Commission in its register of unincorporated associations and its register of recordable gifts to unincorporated associations. In this way, there is transparency as to who is providing the funds that are paid out by the associations.

Patricia Gibson: Will the Minister give way?

Chloe Smith: No, I will not, for entirely unsurprising reasons.

Reportable gifts include a single gift of more than £7,500, two or more gifts of over £500 given by the same person in the same calendar year that total more than £7,500, and any additional gifts of more than £1,500 given by a source from which the UA has already
received a gift of more than £7,500 in the same calendar year. Electoral Commission guidance also states that any UA that intends to make contributions of more than £25,000 should keep records of all the gifts it receives that are worth more than £500.

There are various ways in which offences are deemed to have been committed. As hon. Members are aware, responsibility for regulating political finance sits with the independent Electoral Commission. It is right and proper that that should sit with an independent body. Any concerns about breaches of the law should be reported to the appropriate authority, and a record of the regulated groups who make and receive donations, including MPs, MSPs and other politically active people, is publicly available on the Electoral Commission's website. That data is a treasure trove of information, because it reminds us that the Scottish National party and pro-independence campaigners have accepted political donations from unincorporated associations. Who would believe it?

Colin Clark: It is very good of the Minister to give way; it is unfortunate that the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) would not. As the Minister was about to say, the Scottish Women's Independence Fund Trust, an unincorporated association, has donated money to the SNP. On an associated subject, I would like to ask her opinion of another way of raising finance. The SNP have mentioned sewers; the former First Minister, Alex Salmond, raised £100,000 for a court case—and may have raised more money subsequently. We are talking about a different way of raising money, but does the Minister agree that perhaps Alex Salmond should give that £100,000 back? [Interruption.]

Ian Austin (in the Chair): Order. I call the Minister to respond.

Chloe Smith: Thank you very much, Mr Austin. My hon. Friend reminded us that all parties ought to be above board and transparent about their donations. I can confirm that the Conservative party is above board and transparent, as I would expect it to be.

The Government believe that the rules governing permissible donors and the reporting rules for unincorporated associations are sufficiently comprehensive. The permissible donor rules capture the groups that operate in this area, and the relevant reporting rules provide appropriate transparency, but do not swamp these often small organisations in red tape, which is a consideration. The Government therefore have no plans to amend the law. The 2000 and 2009 Acts introduced greater transparency into this area. We welcome that, because it means that we are able to have this debate backed up by a record from the Electoral Commission of who has received what, allowing us all to be transparent.

I will address transparency in Northern Ireland before closing my remarks. The anonymity provisions there have an important historical provenance. They were introduced by the Labour Government in 2001 and were based on careful recommendations in the Committee on Standards in Public Life's fifth report, published in 1998, which concluded that it would be unsafe to disclose the names of those who had made donations to the Northern Ireland parties, as it might result in their intimidation. The retrospective removal of anonymity could put individuals' safety at risk. We understand the history of that rule. That is why the donations and loans regime for political parties in Northern Ireland was different from that in Great Britain, and that is a matter for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

However, thanks to this Government, there is once again greater transparency around those donations and loans; the Electoral Commission publishes full details of all donations and loans to Northern Ireland parties from July 2017. That start date was set because it represented a consensus across the Northern Ireland parties, which is very important.

Finally, donations to the Conservative party are properly and transparently declared to the Electoral Commission. It is unhelpful when hon. Members make accusations that do not seem to fit with what senior members of their parties say. One might note what the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) said on “Good Morning Scotland” in July 2018. Was there any evidence that the Conservative party had improperly received donations? “No. Absolutely not.” Let us have some consistency, and an understanding of what our elections rules exist to do and the way in which they provide transparency. That applies to unincorporated associations, as well as to the range of other organisations that are correctly mentioned in our electoral law. It is important that we have those rules.

I hope that I have set out why those rules exist, and how they provide transparency to the public. Through that transparency, some perhaps surprising points have arisen from the records. I hope that that is helpful to the House. I hope it allows us all to conduct politics in the respectful manner that we expect, and to display such respect to our constituents.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Residents of Leisure Park Homes

4.30 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered rights and protections for residents of leisure park homes.

It is a pleasure to open this debate under your chairmanship, Mr Austin. If you were to visit my constituency, drive along the A20 past Harrietsham, then turn up a winding single-track lane into the rolling hills of the North Downs area of outstanding natural beauty, after about five minutes you would find yourself at Pilgrims Retreat. It is a beautiful spot surrounded by fields and woodland, and there is hardly a building to be seen other than on the site. It is an ideal spot for a holiday, within easy reach of Leeds castle and the Kent coast, and a lovely place to retire to. That is the dream that several of my constituents gave their life savings to buy into.

The reality is a long way from the rural idyll that they were hoping for. Some have spent a six-figure sum on a park home that they believed they could spend the rest of their days in, only to find that they have bought a holiday home, which means that they do not have the same status as permanent residents and leaves them vulnerable to exploitation.

Some arrived at their new property and found that they could not get in, because there was no path or steps up to the front door. The site owner, Fred Sines, a man with a record who has been previously mentioned in the House, then demanded thousands of pounds in cash to fix the problem. I am told that he has also hiked pitch fees overnight with little warning, and that there is a culture of fear and intimidation, with people being banned from using facilities such as the club room, and threatened with having their properties demolished. All the while, they are paying council tax to the local authority, even though they are not permanent residents.

I recognise that leisure park homes or holiday homes are a significant part of Britain’s tourism industry. They are often in beautiful rural or coastal settings, and can be important drivers of the local economy when used for their true purpose: holidaying. According to a recent report by the UK Caravan and Camping Alliance, holiday homes in mobile home or caravan parks make up 8% of the UK’s tourism sector, generate £3.9 billion in visitor spend, and support 170,000 jobs.

When run in a decent and proper way, holiday parks support local economies and provide much-needed jobs in areas where work can be hard to find, but that is not always the case, and Pilgrims Retreat is not a one-off. In my constituency and elsewhere, holiday homes appear to be being mis-sold as residential homes, depriving the local area of tourist income and leaving residents, some of whom are elderly, in poor health and vulnerable to exploitation, with few rights or protections.

The situation is compounded by the failure of local authorities to enforce the terms of holiday home licences consistently by checking whether people are living there all year round—they should not be—and that they have another, main address. There are undoubtedly many wonderful holiday parks where the owners follow the rules, holidaymakers come and go in peace, and the local economy benefits, but that is not always the case.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a strong case as to why the subject needs to be looked at, and is highlighting the problems that her constituents have experienced.

Does she recognise, however, that many operators do a good job and provide employment for local people? I have several examples in my constituency, such as Meadowhead Ltd, which provides a good service. It is important that the whole industry is not tarnished by the way that those bad examples have conducted themselves.

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend makes a good point. There are also well-managed park homes sites in my constituency, which is a reason to take action where the system is not working. We have to make sure that the whole industry is not tarnished by the actions of an unscrupulous minority.

For a subset of sites, there is a problem. Gaps in the law and inadequate oversight by local authorities allow unscrupulous site owners to benefit from a lack of consumer awareness. To fix that, we need to strengthen the rights and protections for holiday home owners, make sure that owners and potential owners know those rights, and make sure that the law is properly enforced.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a coherent case on both sides of the argument. Does she agree that in some cases—not many—tenants are gaming the system to the disadvantage of park owners, and that a way forward may be more formal legal requirements, through which people who sign leases receive legal advice and are properly bound by the contracts that they sign?

Helen Whately: I have heard the same thing. It is as if my hon. Friend had seen my speech in advance—although I know he has not—because we have clearly come to some of the same conclusions.

I reiterate that where the law does not work and enforcement does not happen, the industry overall gets a bad name. As a consequence, individuals’ dreams of an idyllic retirement in a country or coastal setting turns into a nightmare. One specific reason for that is because the owners of a holiday park home do not own the land that they live on; they are simply leasing the caravan or the mobile home on that land. People think that they are signing up to own the property in the long term, but they are actually signing a short-term lease, which can be for as short a time as 12 years. As they are leaseholders, they are covered only by consumer protection legislation, not wider housing laws.

Under the Mobile Homes Act 2013, local authorities have powers to issue notices to residential site owners when the site is not kept in a good condition. They can be fined up to £5,000 for failure to comply with those notices. The Act also gives councils emergency powers to enter sites at short notice to enforce those notices. The Act also gives councils emergency powers to enter sites at short notice to enforce those notices.

Holiday park homes are excluded from the Act, however, so although it has helped to reduce exploitation on residential sites, that exploitation seems to have shifted to holiday home sites. Solving one problem appears to have created another.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this timely debate. In Scotland, there is a requirement for licences to have been issued to
owners by May, whether they permanently reside on a holiday or residential site. The purpose is to give them the guarantees that are lacking in the cases she has referred to. The Scottish Confederation of Park Home Residents Associations has come together to help those people, and to give them a voice that can be heard by the council when there are complaints, and, more importantly, by the site owners when they deviate from what we would all expect.

Helen Whately: In general, we should look at what is happening in all parts of the United Kingdom to see what works best, and learn from it. I will refer to Wales in a moment, and no doubt the Minister will do the same.

I have already had conversations with the Minister on the issue. She is sympathetic and concerned, and is very much looking into it, which I appreciate. My first questions are whether she will consider extending the relevant parts of the 2013 Act to holiday home owners; whether she will consider introducing tougher penalties for unscrupulous holiday site owners to discourage them from acting in an exploitative way; and whether she will look at the fit and proper person test, which could be introduced in England for residential homes under the Act, and has already been introduced in Wales. Although the test is not perfect, it would be a step in the right direction, and would make it harder for a known unscrupulous landlord to get a site licence.

As well as introducing stronger rights and protections for the purchasers of holiday homes, we need to make sure that existing legislation is enforced. My understanding is that in England, the responsibility falls on local councils; the local council, for instance, should check that holiday home owners have another primary address, so that their holiday home is not their only and main address, and should also ensure that holiday home owners are not staying in their holiday home all year round.

It appears, at least in Maidstone in the case of Pilgrims Retreat, that my local borough council has not been doing those things, so the situation has been allowed to continue for months but for years. It has built up, so that tens, indeed potentially hundreds, of people who believe they are residents are affected, even though the same local authority has been collecting council tax from these individuals, as if they were permanent residents.

The site licence at Pilgrims Retreat has been extended from 11 months to 12 months, which compounds the confusion of individuals seeking to buy properties there and live in them by giving them the impression that they can stay in these places all year round. I do not believe that my local council is alone in doing that.

Given the situation and the various ways in which individuals at Pilgrims Retreat have been let down, I welcome the fact that my local council is considering an amnesty for them and is trying to find ways to avoid making the residents—as they believe they are—homeless, because these properties are their only residence, and they have spent their savings on them; but in general, the situation should not and must not be allowed to continue.

If borough councils across the country are really struggling and failing to enforce the rules, it would be right to look at other options for licensing and enforcement. I ask the Minister to consider what could make enforcement work better. What changes to the rules might make enforcement easier? Should there be other organisations involved, or other levels at which enforcement and licensing occur, perhaps at county level? Or should there be an independent regulator with statutory enforcement powers?

To make things easier, perhaps there should also be a change to the rules. When a site has a 12-month licence, people might be told that they cannot stay there all year round, but it is really hard to enforce that rule. It would be easier if a site simply closed for a period of the year, for one or two months. That would not necessarily be popular with the holiday park owners, who are trying to run a business in which people might want to take a holiday at any time of the year, but there is a balance to be struck between making sure that the business model works, and making sure that these properties are holiday homes, because if they become de facto housing developments, they are totally failing to achieve their objective for the economy.

We need stronger protections for the individuals who live in these homes, and need to make sure that any new protections are properly enforced. We need to make sure that consumers know their rights. I have spoken to the British Holiday & Home Parks Association and listened to stories from all around the country, and it seems to be clear that many people are not alert to the risk of being mis-sold a holiday home. They hear that residents pay council tax; they know about 12-month leases; and often the site owners are the only source of information and advice for somebody planning a purchase, up to and including the point of sale. Many purchasers genuinely believe that they are buying a residential home.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): My hon. Friend is making some good points. On the issue of advice, is there not a potential role for solicitors in providing advice about the transactions involved? We are not talking about inconsiderable sums of money; sometimes we are talking about a lot of money for the individuals who are buying these park homes. What role does she feel that solicitors and the legal process should have in helping people to make wise decisions and understand the risks involved?

Helen Whately: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point, which is similar to one that was made earlier. When individuals are spending these sums of money—£100,000 or £200,000—perhaps they should be required to get some form of legal advice; it would be right to consider that. Clearly, we do not want to make the process more onerous than the process of buying a home, but one cannot buy a bricks-and-mortar house without going through a conveyancing process. Perhaps if there was a requirement for some kind of more formal process, fewer people would fall into the trap of misunderstanding what they are buying.

There is also a role for communication. Perhaps there is an opportunity for a communications campaign targeted at this market—at potential and current holiday park home owners—so that we get through to the people who might well become victims of this situation. We need to address the mismatch between people’s perceptions and the reality of buying a holiday park home. People
need to understand that they are not buying the land; they are buying a lease. They need to know the implications of that.

Looking around, I believe that there are colleagues who may wish to speak, and I am very keen to make sure that my hon. Friend the Minister has time to answer my questions, so I will conclude by saying that by strengthening legislation to give protections to holiday park home owners, by ensuring proper enforcement, and by improving consumer awareness, we can and must make sure that other people do not fall into the same trap that my constituents at Pilgrims Retreat did.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak in Westminster Hall at any time, but this issue is one that I have a particular interest in, because I have a leisure and park homes facility in my constituency of Strangford, located in the village of Ballyhalbert. It has been there for many years.

I thank the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) for securing this debate. I am mindful that the last time I spoke in Westminster Hall on the issue of leisure and park homes, the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), was not a Minister, but she is now. She brought this issue forward in that debate, and she and I both spoke then. It is a pity that some years have passed by and we have not seen the conclusion that she and I wanted to see.

I will speak on a very specific point, which relates to some of the problems that we have had in my constituency. They may not be the issues that the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent has referred to, but they are issues that I feel I have to air in Westminster Hall today.

They relate to my time prior to coming to Westminster, when I was in the Northern Ireland Assembly, doing the job I had before this one. During my time in the Assembly, the Caravans Bill, which was a private Member’s Bill, was brought before us and I fully supported the rights not simply of those who owned holiday caravans but of those who chose to live permanently on site, of whom there were many. Caravans were a burgeoning business at that time, but from the local council to the Assembly and then obviously to here in Westminster, I have followed the issue. I was supportive of proper rights then and I am supportive of them now. The hon. Lady has put forward a very good and solid case today.

I am very pleased to see the Minister in Westminster Hall again. She seems to be in Westminster Hall almost as often as I am; this is two days running. [Laughter.] I jest.

Back in 2015, I questioned the then Minister—now Secretary of State for Work and Pensions—about electricity prices for park home residents, outlining concerns about the lack of energy efficiency schemes for those living in park homes. I was ever mindful of the fact that the age of those living in park homes is from 55 upwards, perhaps up to 80, and I asked the then Minister to see what she could do to help those people, taking into account the fact that park homes cannot have electricity meters. That was just one of the many issues that I raised at that time. It was clear that there were indiscretions and difficulties, and I want to highlight some of those as well today.

We are considering another issue in this debate. The Mobile Homes Act 1983 gives protection, as do the Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act 1960 and part 2 of the Consumer Rights Act 2015, which protects consumers from enforceability of unfair terms in contracts—the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent referred to unfair terms in contracts. In addition, there are the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008. There are all of these pieces of legislation, and yet residents are not protected and are unsure of their rights. I want to air those issues today.

For the record, it is important that I say that this matter is a devolved one in Northern Ireland, and so it is not the Minister’s responsibility to respond to all of my points. Nevertheless, I want to air these issues, because the problems that the hon. Lady mentioned are happening in England—that is why all the English Members are here today—and they are probably also happening in Scotland and Wales. In Northern Ireland, they would be under the control of the Assembly—if only we had a functioning Assembly.

I have been dealing with an issue related to the park homes in my constituency, in co-operation with the local council, and these matters are certainly not straightforward or simple. As an example of the litigation and the problems that occur as a result of it, the removal of fences was a battle from beginning to end. The owners of the park homes site are required to operate under a licence issued by the council, which is displayed on site. The licence conditions relate to amenity and safety, and are based on model licence conditions issued by the environment Department in 1992.

I had a meeting with local residents. Again, many things happen at those meetings: some local residents come with problems, and others sometimes need some encouragement to follow the rules that are laid down.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Like the hon. Gentleman, I have many holiday parks in my constituency, and it is important to put on record that not all are as unscrupulous as some of the examples that we have heard about. However, the hon. Gentleman makes an important point: often, the constituents who come to us with problems are not fully aware of their rights, or of some of the remedies that are available to them. Does he agree that we should be looking at how to raise awareness of those remedies?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. What he has said is what we are all trying to achieve, including the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent and myself.

All parks are inspected annually for compliance with the model conditions during the annual site licensing visit to the park homes. The licence states:

“Fences must not be erected around or near to individual caravans unless they are of non-combustible material and they do not present a safety hazard.”

I felt at the time, and still feel, that many of these people have had these fences in place for 10 or 15 years, and there was never a bit of bother until about three years.
People planted their wooden palisades, their trees or small bushes, and some council staff then interpreted those things as dangerous.

The council stated:

“While the Council has a duty to ensure compliance...the responsibility rests with the park owner. In this case...the owner had failed to ensure compliance and to recognise that the presence of such combustible materials can assist the rapid spread of fire, and that”

enclosing individual sites

“does not allow for access for emergency vehicles.”

That was what the whole issue was about.

Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): I urge the devolved Administrations, when examining issues with residential park homes, to look at what this Parliament did with the revised legislation and regulations. I had a steady stream of casework prior to those revisions: I have not had a single piece of casework since. In the light of the residual issues that the hon. Gentleman is talking about, I urge the devolved Administrations to look at what this Parliament has introduced.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention; I am just coming to my conclusion, Mr Austin, as you will be glad to hear. The conclusion is that we got to the end of the road and got the problem sorted—hallelujah for that. However, getting it around took a long time. After much deliberation, and by agreement between the park homes and the council, the residents have been permitted to retain the boundary fencing as it does not assist the spread of fire from property to property, which we always said it did not.

That one issue highlights the quagmire that living in a park home can create. We need to have specific, clarified regulation to protect park owners and residents, and to allow a better working relationship with local authorities. Those in park homes are typically retired and sometimes vulnerable people, and I do not feel that the current quagmire of guidance and legal protection offers those people protection. I truly believe that this must change.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ian Austin (in the Chair): I have to call the Front Benchers at 5.10 pm. There are four people who want to speak, so I would be grateful if Members could restrict their remarks to about four minutes.

4.53 pm

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) for raising this important issue, which affects a lot of us here. I have visited both residential and leisure park homes in my constituency, and under the correct management, there is no doubt that they can be well-run sites that are great places to live or to go on holiday. However, some of them are in the wrong hands, and bad practice can creep into leisure sites, creating an exploitative way of doing business. The lack of regulation is certainly making that situation worse.

During my visit to a leisure park site in my constituency, I heard accounts from many constituents of maintenance disputes, intimidation and harassment by site management, and rules being changed: one day, those residents could have an outdoor shed, and the next day they could not. One day, they could have plant pots, and then suddenly they could only have three plant pots, with all the rest being smashed. The management was quite threatening, and the residents were definitely frightened.

Even more concerning were reports about mis-selling of leisure homes as permanent accommodation, and unclear contractual arrangements on reselling and pitch fees. There were many stories of people having been sold a dream of selling up and buying a holiday home, with an emphasis on the site being open for most of the year. I was even handed photographic evidence of signage stating that a site was an ideal starter home, and encouraging people to move into those starter homes. In places such as Chichester, where the average house price is over £300,000, that is an attractive offer for many. Of course, all the buyers think is that they have to go on holiday for two weeks, which most of us do. Many of the residents were only given part 1 of their licence agreement during the sales process, with part 2—the terms and conditions—made available only after the sale, or in some cases never supplied. One gentleman I spoke with
explained that he had signed his contract despite not seeing all the small print because, after divorcing, he needed to find somewhere to live really quickly.

From those examples, and from others shared by Members today, it is evident that there is a widespread problem of holiday park sites being used residentially, with owners not adequately protected under consumer rights legislation. Of course, local authorities have enforcement powers, but they are concerned about using them: they know that this is going on, but they are concerned about creating a problem that they cannot solve, because if people are made homeless there are not enough homes. If an owner is a member of the National Caravan Council, then they can also use that council to raise concerns. However, not all sites are members. I visited a park home site recently, and it had left the NCC, so there was no means of redress.

Where site owners are guilty of mis-selling, the balance of power is completely in their favour. Residents have no permanent address and possibly no local connection to the area. That can lead to problems registering on the electoral roll, accessing local services or receiving benefits they need. Residents are often too scared to come forward with complaints because they are all too aware of their vulnerable position. They are almost stateless in a way; they do not have any rights. Essentially, they are fearful of being evicted and made homeless. Consumer rights legislation does not offer these grey area residents the same level of statutory protections, such as against harassment or rights over information such as utility charges, as those living on residential sites. I fully support the calls we have heard for the Mobile Homes Act 1983 to be extended to leisure home owners, which would go a long way to evening up the imbalance and protecting the many vulnerable and often elderly residents.

The issue is of interest to me for two reasons. First, the Mobile Homes Act 2013, which was brought in to stamp out abuses in the park homes sector, started off as a private Member’s Bill that I took through the Commons. It appears that the measures introduced by that Act to outlaw rogue site owners have had the unintended consequence that they now focus their attention on holiday parks. Secondly, the holiday parks sector is important in my constituency. Leisure park homes are an important component part of the tourism industry around Lowestoft and along the Suffolk and Norfolk coast. Generally, those businesses are well run. It is important to bear in mind that the vast majority of site owners are responsible business people.

As I see it, we have to address two issues: the unscrupulous operators who have moved into the sector, and the people who have moved into the parks with the intention of living, rather than holidaying, there. They can be addressed in two ways. First, there is a whole raft of legislation that prohibits mis-selling and fraud, and it should be enforced. That includes the Consumer Contracts (Information, Cancellation and Additional Charges) Regulations 2013, the Consumer Rights Act 2015, the Misrepresentation Act 1967, the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008 and, very importantly, the Fraud Act 2006.

Secondly, responsible site owners should do all they can to ensure that people do not live on parks as their main homes. That means properly checking the purchaser’s home address, and asking for a utility bill and a council tax receipt to confirm it. It means watching out for tell-tale signs that the mobile home might be being used as a permanent home, such as cars leaving and returning at what could be described as commuter times, and washing being on the line throughout the year—in particular, school uniforms being hung out to dry.

My concern about additional legislation is that we would need to ensure that it did not have an unintended negative impact on local economies, many of which are in coastal locations and are fragile and heavily reliant on tourism. Moreover, it has to be pointed out that in many instances local authorities do not enforce existing laws and regulations due to financial restrictions and staff shortages. I have to ask: what is the point of passing new laws that will not be enforced?

We need to get the councils a better local government funding settlement at the forthcoming comprehensive spending review, so that they can properly regulate the sector, applying the rules so as to drive out the rogues who are making many peoples’ lives a misery. My hon. Friend has highlighted a growing problem that must be stamped out, and I will work with her to do that.

5.4 pm

James Heappey (Welsh) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) on securing this debate. The issue has arisen on a number of occasions in my constituency, and I have carried out casework on behalf of people on both sides of the equation. Before I get into that, may I use this opportunity to pay tribute to the emergency services in Somerset, who responded so well to the ceiling that collapsed at Pontins in Brean the other night? A number of people were injured. I hear that the emergency services responded with their usual professionalism and expertise, and ensured that injury and inconvenience were absolutely minimised.

Brean is a wonderful place to go for a holiday. Tens of thousands of people do so every week, all season long, and there are many more caravans and mobile homes in the wider Burnham-on-Sea area. I understand that it is second only to Skegness in the European rankings for concentrations of caravans. We are very proud of that.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I feel that I should mention that my hon. Friend is completely correct: Skegness is the proud owner of the highest concentration in Europe. While I envy my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) for securing this debate, it is important to set it in context. The overall benefit to the economy of the industry is enormous, and the rogues are small in number, even if their effects are genuinely profound.
James Heappey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He knows, as I do, that what Brean lacks in quantity as against Skegness, we make up for in quality. I know he agrees with that.

There are effectively four groups affected by the issue. The local community beyond the park are frustrated that there is additional pressure on local services and infrastructure without any due planning process having been followed. Sedgemoor District Council has had to retrospectively allow planning permission to protect the value of the asset that the residents of park homes have spent money on, but there is a lack of consultation and transparency in the planning process when that emergency measure is taken. There is also a loss of tourism revenue, because permanent residents tend not to eat out and use local attractions as much as those visiting for just a week.

The local community is disadvantaged, too. Reputable, law-abiding caravan and leisure parks in the area miss out. There is the reputational risk to the industry of all operators being tarred with the same brush, which is unfair. When this issue arose two or three years ago, Sedgemoor employed a company called Capacitygrid. I am sure it did nothing other than what it was invited to do, but its method of checking that all the tens of thousands of caravans in the Brean area were legit was to be quite harassing in how it did its business, and how it got proof of another address. The park owners had to put up with their residents being affected by that company, which had been instructed by Sedgemoor to go in and check on the scale of the problem.

The local council has to pay for enforcement out of our council taxes. It has the grumpiness that comes with the difficult planning decisions that it needs to take if it is to retrospectively approve the caravans as permanent places of residence. As the caravans are already there, there is none of the community infrastructure levy or section 106 money that would come with a more routine planning decision, so there is none of the development that comes with having secured that money during the planning process.

Most importantly, the residents are so often taken for a ride. They are overly trusting, but they see an opportunity to have a permanent home in a place where they have enjoyed holidaying their entire working life. They take that opportunity and put their life savings into it, only to find that what they have bought is effectively worthless, because there is no planning permission for that residence to be used year round. I have had it reported to me that residents struggle to access local services. They are at the mercy of unscrupulous park owners.

I agree with so much of the expertise that has been shared with us about what could be done. There is plenty of legislation that protects consumer rights, and our first instinct should be to use what is on the statute book, rather than to develop new laws. However, it is important that we address this issue. From my experience in nearly four years as the MP for Wells, I have seen enough of this problem on the coast to know that it is something that the Government should address. I very much look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

5.9 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin. I thank the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) for introducing the debate.

For anybody watching, I begin by making clear the distinction between leisure park homes and residential homes, because that is extremely important. The terms are not interchangeable. I completely agree with the concerns about leisure park homes raised by the hon. Lady and others. Leisure park homes can be bought by unsuspecting people in the mistaken belief that they can live in them all year round, when that would be a clear breach of licensing conditions for holiday homes. Those who have purchased a leisure park home must have a permanent residential address elsewhere, as such homes cannot be used as a main residence. That can affect council tax, planning permission requirements and so on, as the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) said.

Permanent residential park homes, of which I have a couple in my constituency, are not the same; owners can live in those houses full time, all year round. The regulation of those sites is a matter for the Scottish Government. However, clearly the terms and conditions attached to the different kinds of parks—leisure park and permanent residential park homes—need to be made absolutely clear to prospective buyers. As we have heard, that is not always the case.

The situation is complex. With regard to permanent residential homes, I have heard of situations in Scotland where parks are not properly maintained, despite significant charges being levied on residents for that very purpose. In response, the Scottish Government have introduced a new licensing system that gives local authorities enforcement powers that they had not enjoyed before. That means that the local authority can serve improvement notices if the site owner commits a criminal offence in breaching a licence condition.

In addition, the local authority can take the steps set out in an improvement notice if the site owner defaults. Penalty notices can be served, and the local authority can apply to the sheriff for the appointment of an interim manager. Furthermore, emergency action can be taken if there is imminent risk of serious harm to the health and safety of a person. That represents a significant beefing up of local authority powers, and is a response to site managers or owners simply collecting money while not fulfilling their obligations to keep sites maintained to the standard that those with park homes are entitled to expect. Where there are gaps in the law regarding leisure park homes, they should be addressed, as the hon. Member for Chichester pointed out.

Another issue relating to permanent sites that owners are simply not aware of in every case, until they reach the point of resale, is that permanent residential park home owners have to pay sales commissions of up to 10% on the resale of their park home, as the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) pointed out. The question that we must ask is: if residents do not know about the charge, why do they not? Clearly the system is not working as we would wish it to. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) pointed out, the power supply to these homes is also an area of concern.

Martin Whitfield: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Patricia Gibson: We are really short of time: I think the Chair would like me to proceed. I do apologise.
In Scotland, we hope to counter some of those difficulties. All prospective mobile home buyers will now have 28 days’ notice to consider the terms of the agreement before the sale can be concluded. It is important that this group of consumers have the proper protection that they need when choosing to live year-round on licensed permanent mobile home sites, because it is a very expensive undertaking. It is important that the system be transparent, open and fair, both to permanent residence site owners, and to those who choose to live on such sites.

I say to the Minister, as other Members have said, that protections are required to make the system of purchasing leisure or residential homes, and the rights and responsibilities of each party, fair for all concerned and transparent. Those measures need to be in place. As I always say in such debates on devolved matters, it is really important that England looks at what Scotland has done to see what can be learned, and vice versa. We should all pursue best practice, no matter where in the UK we live.

5.14 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin, and to speak in this debate. The hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) made a convincing case for the need for protection of leisure park homes. She also painted a lovely picture of her constituency. Is it any wonder that people want to go to the rolling hills of the north downs and retire there? What a terrible thing it is when they find that it is not quite what they expected.

We heard tales of pitch fees increasing, and about the culture of fear and mis-selling. The right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) rightly asked who some of the people running these homes are, and what can be done about the problems. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) asked why nothing had been done, when he has been raising these issues for some years. The hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) talked about people feeling almost “stateless”, which is a strong and apt word.

The hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) talked about his role with regard to previous legislation, and made a really important point about the need to protect the tourism industry. Anything that we do must not damage that. The hon. Member for Wells (James Heappey) told us that his area is second only to Skegness in its concentration of caravans, and we must listen to what he has to say.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): I am very sorry that I was not here earlier; there were distractions in the House. Does the hon. Lady agree that it is incredibly important to draw a distinction between sites that are badly run and badly managed, where bad practices are endemic, and really well-run sites that have had zero complaints over many years? For example, there is Pinewoods in my constituency, near Wells-next-the-Sea, Seaborne park in Hunstanton, and McDonnell caravans park. We have a number of really well-run sites with no history of complaints whatever. We need to find a way of ensuring that we drill down and protect those people who need protection, while not damaging those well-run sites.

Sarah Jones: I agree with that completely. The poor form tarnishes the whole industry, and people who are doing things well do not, on the whole, object to changes in regulation or legislation because they are already doing what they should be. The hon. Gentleman makes a good point.

As we have heard, there are lots of problems that we need to try to fix. Residents in leisure park homes are not afforded the limited protections of mobile home owners on sites with residential planning permission. They do not have the special protections under the Mobile Homes Act 2013, as we discussed. In the Opposition’s view, it is right to call for protections to be extended to residents living permanently in leisure park homes. We should also ask why residents are being sold permanent homes in leisure parks that do not have residential planning permission. It is unclear how widespread that practice is. Perhaps the Minister can tell us her sense of the scale of the problem, and what the Government consider the issues to be.

The hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent talked about the protections afforded to residents of park homes through the 2013 Act, but it is worth emphasising that abuses are still happening across all park homes despite those changes in law. There is a need for wider reform. Organisations such as the Park Home Owners Justice Campaign and the Park Homes Policy Forum have worked for years to expose the exploitation of park home residents, which is still ongoing. Park homes have been described to me as “like leasehold bullying, but with criminal thuggery thrown in.”

We know that 62% of leasehold home owners feel as if they were mis-sold them; I would not be surprised if a similar, or higher, number of park homes residents felt the same way. Just as there are leaseholders with onerous ground rents, park home owners can be charged extortionate pitch fees that can increase rapidly each year. As with leasehold, hidden clauses in park homes contracts can cause significant hardship down the line; residents have limited routes of redress when things go wrong, and any enforcement is often affected by a lack of transparency and opaque structures.

However, unlike the situation with most leaseholds, park home owners also report, as we have heard, experiencing or being threatened with violence and other illegal activity. We saw that most prominently in the disgraceful treatment of Sonia McColl, a leading campaigner for park homes reform. After campaigning for action on rogue park owners, Sonia had to sell her park home and move due to death threats. She then, astonishingly, had her entire home stolen while waiting for it to be delivered to her new site. She was made an OBE for services to society, but I think society has let her down. I asked her what issues she would like to raise with the Minister; she wants to know, first, when the consumer prices index instead of the retail prices index will be used to calculate the increase in pitch fee, and secondly when independent research will be done on the 10% commission payable to site owners on the sale of residence properties. She will be happy to share the Minister’s response with the 30,000 residents on her database.

I want to give the Minister time to respond, so I will say only a little more. The Government have recognised the systemic problems with park homes, and have promised to legislate on areas such as pitch fee reviews, but they
have not done so yet. They have been promising for some time to get a grip on the wider leasehold scandal, but there has been no primary legislation on it. Stronger laws are worthless if they are not enforced; I am sure that the Minister will talk about the duties of local authorities, but in their own recent analysis the Government admitted that the 2013 licensing and inspection powers are not being applied because of a lack of dedicated resource in councils. That is not really a surprise, given the billions of pounds of cuts made to local authorities under this Government.

I hope that the Minister will outline when her Department will introduce the legislation that was promised back in October, and will say how she will support councils that are too strapped for funds to enforce it. The Conservative party claims to be the party of home ownership, but here we are again, talking about homeowners being exploited, mis-selling, exploitative contract terms and excessive fees and commissions charged to residents who were told that they were buying a home, with all the rights and freedoms that that affords. This is the third time today that the Government have been challenged by a member of their own party about the treatment of homeowners on their watch. I look forward to hearing when they will act on their promises.

5.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin. I congratulate my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) on securing this important debate and on her tireless work on rights and protections for holiday caravan owners. Fifteen other Members have made estimable contributions, and I commend them all; they really know their stuff, and it has been a great debate.

Last year, my hon. Friend brought to my attention her concerns about some terrible issues facing holiday caravan owners on a mixed-use caravan site in her constituency. Since then, she and I have had fruitful discussions to better understand the issues. Some of those issues fall within the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy; I extend my thanks to the Minister for small business, consumers and corporate responsibility—the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately)—for her interest in the matter. We have already had discussions and agreed several actions for both our Departments, and we hope to update my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent on them over the coming weeks.

Several important issues have been raised today about the rights of holiday caravan owners and the challenges that they face. The Government have already introduced significant protections for holiday caravan owners. Planning permission may be granted for part of a site to be used for holiday purposes and other parts for residential purposes; I understand that my hon. Friend’s concerns relate to such mixed-use sites. Sadly, our discussion will not include the information that Sonia McColl was after, because we are talking about holiday sites.

Those who live permanently on the residential part of a mixed-use site are protected under the Mobile Homes Act 1983, but as we have heard, that protection does not extend to holiday caravan owners on the site. The local authority will also issue a site licence once planning permission has been granted, but before I talk about site licensing, let me address my hon. Friend’s queries about the rights of holiday caravan owners.

As my hon. Friend highlighted, some holiday caravan owners end up living permanently on their holiday sites, for complex reasons. Some consumers see holiday caravans as a cheaper option—my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) mentioned the disgraceful situation facing first-time buyers—and may buy them without seeking legal advice, which obviously should not happen. Some holiday caravan owners can end up living permanently on the holiday site because they have been mis-sold their holiday caravan by a rogue site owner who has presented it as being suitable for residential use. That can put them under huge financial pressure, so I understand the suggestion to tackle the problem by extending the protections of the 1983 Act.

The mobile homes legislation, which sets out the contractual relationship between a site owner and a resident, applies only to sites with planning permission for residential use. Applying it to all holiday caravan owners would mean such accommodation no longer being available in the tourism sector. As we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) and for Wells (James Heappey), and from my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), it is important that we protect the holiday sector and the many benefits that it provides.

The Government have already introduced significant protections for holiday caravan owners under consumer legislation. What is required is to ensure that prospective purchasers of holiday caravans are aware of the rights and responsibilities available to them under consumer law. The rules, which are designed to protect individual buyers from unfair commercial practices, are set out in the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008. Breaches of those rules are a criminal offence. In 2014, they were supplemented to provide a private right of redress for consumers who have fallen victim to misleading commercial practices such as presenting a holiday caravan as a permanent residence, hiding information, or providing information in an unclear, ambiguous or untimely way.

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Wheeler: Very briefly, dear boy.

Jim Shannon: Sometimes purchasers do not know that their property will depreciate massively within a year or two. They need to be told that at an early stage.

Mrs Wheeler: As ever, the hon. Gentleman brings luminosity to the problem.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent knows, enforcement of the legislation is the responsibility of the local authority trading standards service. There are already strong penalties for mis-selling by providing misleading advice or omitting material information: it is a criminal offence punishable by a fine on summary conviction, up to the statutory maximum, or up to two years’ imprisonment, as my hon. Friends the Members for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and for Wells mentioned.
**Helen Whately:** I am very aware of the mis-selling legislation, but I am sure that the Minister is aware that some residents are truly fearful of going down that route, because they think that they are so vulnerable that they may lose their homes.

**Mrs Wheeler:** My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Towards the end of my brief speech, I will answer her as best I can.

Another measure that I know is of interest to hon. Members is the fit and proper person test. We have also heard of cases of harassment and intimidation of holiday caravan owners; harassment is a criminal and civil offence, so I advise anyone being harassed to immediately contact the police.

Let me expand on the caravan site licensing requirements that I mentioned earlier in relation to the fit and proper person test. Under the Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act 1960, all caravan sites in England, except those exempted, are required to have a site licence in addition to planning permission. The purpose of licensing is to ensure that sites are safe for residents and other users.

The Mobile Homes Act 2013 amended the 1960 Act to introduce a new local authority site licensing regime, which applies to all “relevant protected sites”, including sites with planning permission for residential use only, as well as mixed-use sites with planning permission for both holiday and residential use. Local authorities’ powers include the ability to issue compliance notices if a site owner breaches their site licence conditions. If an owner fails to comply with a notice, the local authority can prosecute them; if convicted, they face an unlimited fine. The 2013 Act also made provision to introduce a fit and proper person test for site owners and managers of all relevant protected sites, including mixed sites. I know that Members will be pleased to learn that we will publish a technical consultation in the summer and legislate to introduce the scheme when parliamentary time allows.

The issues that we have discussed today are very complex, but I reassure hon. Members that the Government are committed to improving the sector. We have already introduced important legislation to strengthen the rights of consumers, but we know that there is more work to be done. I will continue to work with the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood, to consider what other measures can be taken on consumer protection, to raise consumers’ awareness of their rights when purchasing holiday caravans and traders’ awareness of their legal obligations.

I will arrange a further meeting with my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent to update her on the actions that I have set out to undertake. Once again, I congratulate her on securing this debate on such a hugely important matter. It is a pleasure to be in Westminster Hall again.

5.29 pm

**Helen Whately:** I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. I feel that it has been a very balanced conversation: it has made it clear that the vast majority of those who operate holiday home sites do so in an appropriate and thoughtful way and look after the users of their park homes, but that we need to crack down on the unscrupulous owners.

5.30 pm

*Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).*
Westminster Hall

Thursday 28 February 2019

[Mr Virendra Sharma in the Chair]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS
First 1,000 Days of Life

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

1.30 pm

Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): We begin with the Select Committee statement. Dr Paul Williams will speak on the publication of the thirteenth report of the Health and Social Care Committee, “First 1,000 days of life”, for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call hon. Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and call Dr Williams to respond to these in turn. Members can expect to be called only once and their questions should be brief.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Sharma, for inviting me to address this Chamber, so that I can present the Health and Social Care Committee’s report into the first 1,000 days of life.

I have been studying and working in health for the past 27 years and I have concluded that if our society wants the most effective interventions to improve health, we must act in the period from conception to the age of two. That is because the seeds of health inequalities are sown during that time. Good social, emotional, physical and language development during that time is crucial to building healthy brains and children, and having a healthy society.

This week our report set out an ambition challenge to the Government and all our colleagues in the House. We want to kick-start the second revolution in early years services, as recommended by the Marmot review in 2010, so that our country can become the best place in the world for a child to be born. Building that kind of society drives me, not only as an MP, but as a father and doctor.

I thank the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) for letting me take the Chair of the Committee for this inquiry. It is typical of her generosity of spirit that she seeks to give opportunities to others. I hope that I have done justice to the chance she gave me. I thank my Committee colleagues—of all parties and of none—for their support and guidance during our inquiry. I thank our Health and Social Care Committee staff team, particularly Lewis Pickett, Dr Joe Freer and Huw Yardley, who played a crucial role in helping us to make this report a reality.

Almost all research into this subject demonstrates that our path in life is set during the crucial first 1,000 days from conception to the age of two. Healthy social and emotional development during that time lays the foundations for lifelong good physical and mental health. Yet, our current political system invests a fortune in reacting to problems much later in life, leaving a gaping void where we should be warriors for a fairer and healthier society.

During the first 1,000 days of life, more than 1 million new brain connections are made every single second, and babies’ brains are shaped by the way in which they interact with others. However, more than 8,000 babies under the age of one in England currently live in households where domestic violence, alcohol or drug dependency and severe mental illness are all present. Over 200,000 children under the age of one live with an adult who has experienced domestic violence or abuse. Two million children under the age of five live with an adult with a mental health problem.

We know that many children who experience such adversity become happy and healthy adults, but adversity in childhood is strongly linked to almost all health problems and many social problems. Children exposed to adverse childhood experiences are much more likely to get heart disease, cancer and mental health problems than those who are not. Children exposed to four or more ACEs are 30 times more likely to attempt suicide at some point in their life, 11 times more likely to end up in prison and three times more likely to smoke as adults than those exposed to no ACEs. Our politics is currently failing some of these babies and other children who are born into families where poverty strongly affects their chance of achieving good health.

As part of this inquiry, our Committee read 90 submissions of written evidence and held three focus groups with stakeholders. I thank those who made superb contributions to our three oral evidence sessions. I particularly thank David Munday from Unison, Sally Hogg from Parent Infant Partnership and Viv Bennett from Public Health England for their guidance to me.

Our Committee was keen to reach outside Westminster for evidence. We hosted an online forum on Mumsnet, where we heard 80 stories from parents telling us about their experiences of pregnancy and early childhood, as well as their views on services. We visited the Blackpool Better Start project, run by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and funded by the Big Lottery Fund. We held focus groups with representatives from councils, clinical commissioning groups and charities from across the country.

We all know how austerity has affected our councils and the NHS over the last nine years, but we saw how a relatively small Big Lottery Fund investment had helped local authorities to redesign their services. Staff were able to take time to reflect. The extra money brought added capacity and outside expertise. We saw joined-up, effective collaboration between the council, NHS commissioners and providers, the voluntary sector and the police.

We also saw the importance of investing in long-term goals and service transformation, rather than just using money to firefight short-term challenges. We heard how having a one-stop shop for families helped to provide better support, and helped professionals to have better relationships with each other and to share information. We visited community spaces across Blackpool, including a library and a local park, which had been transformed by members of the local community, to make them more suitable for families with young children. We heard
about the importance of a father in a young child’s life. Some fathers say that they lack parenting skills and other fathers felt that the system excluded them.

I firmly believe that we need to devote much more attention and protection to resources for this crucial period of life. There are many people across the political divide who share that belief. This is an area where politicians should be working together. It was very encouraging to hear that the Early Years Family Support Ministerial Group, led by the Leader of the House, was announced shortly after the start of our inquiry. That has the potential to take forward some of our Committee’s recommendations. I will soon be meeting with the Leader of the House to hear about the group’s progress.

Our inquiry has identified the need for a long-term, cross-Government strategy for the first 1,000 days of life, setting demanding goals to reduce ACEs, improve school readiness, and reduce infant mortality and child poverty. Our report recommends that the Minister for the Cabinet Office should be given specific Cabinet-level responsibility for the oversight of this national strategy.

We want communities, the NHS and voluntary groups to be led by local authorities, to develop their plans to bring this Government strategy to life, inspiring improved support for children, parents and families in their area. We think that a Government transformation fund should be established to encourage these different groups to come together, to pool their resources and deliver shared, agreed actions. We also think that a single nominated individual in each area should be accountable to the Government for progress.

Our report also calls for the existing, and actually very good, healthy child programme to be improved and be given greater impetus. It should be expanded to focus more on the whole family rather than just the child, begin before conception, deliver more continuity of care for families—something we found families really valued—and extend health visitor engagement beyond the age of two and a half, to ensure that all children become school-ready.

We heard from Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and parts of the United Kingdom that had enhanced the healthy child programme. However, we also heard from too many areas where some of the contact with health visitors was just a letter, and we were told that 65% of families do not even see a health visitor at all after the six to eight-week check. That clearly is not good enough. Our report recommends that information sharing needs to be significantly improved. Information needs to be better shared between organisations so care can be better co-ordinated and the long-term impact of an intervention can be tracked and assessed.

Alongside that, we need a workforce strategy to address the reduction in health visitors. That does not seem to have been a deliberate strategy, but happened because local authorities were given the funds for the healthy child programme at the same time as they had their budgets cut. We also want the strategy to make sure that knowledge and skills are improved, especially knowledge of ACEs and the importance of using motivational interviewing techniques.

If we get this crucial 1,000 days of life right, it will have huge benefits for everyone in our society. As politicians, we should try to get it right not just because it makes financial sense, but because every single one of us in Parliament has a moral responsibility to our country’s children. Every child deserves the best start in life.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his excellent chairing of the inquiry, his drafting of the report and his speech. Children in their first 1,000 years do not have as much of a political voice as other lobby groups, but does he agree that when Governments face difficult decisions about spending priorities, spending money on those children makes more sense than spending money on older young people in higher education, many of whom are well-off and talented and will do perfectly well in the rest of their lives? The best investment is in those first 1,000 years.

Dr Williams: I agree with my right hon. Friend’s proposition that investment at the beginning of life is likely to pay the greatest dividends, particularly in reducing inequalities. As politicians, we should represent all members of our communities, not just those who are old enough to vote or who choose to vote. There is an opportunity in the comprehensive spending review to make the case for long-term investment in that group of children.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Ind): I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his effective chairing of the inquiry, and for his powerful speech. I also pay tribute to the other Committee members and the wider Committee team for the excellent report. It is fantastic that it sets out effectively the importance of early intervention in the first 1,000 days if we are to make the greatest difference and have the greatest impact on reducing inequalities.

Will the hon. Gentleman join me in paying tribute to a group in my constituency, the Dartmouth Nurslings, for its work to support breastfeeding mothers through peer-to-peer support? Will he touch on the evidence about the important of breastfeeding in the first 1,000 days of life, and how effective it can be? Will he also join me in hoping that we can reduce some of the fragmentation that means there is not a consistent level of support across the country? I hope that such groups will receive the support they deserve.

Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): Order. Hon. Members should keep their questions short.

Dr Paul Williams: I absolutely join the hon. Lady in commending the breastfeeding peer support workers in Totnes, and those in many other parts of the country—I have met some in my constituency, too. There is a common theme: when services are reconfigured and new services are put out to tender, the people who have devoted a lot of time and effort as volunteers can find themselves excluded. That is partly because of the nature of commissioning and tendering.

The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health gave us compelling evidence about breastfeeding. In the United Kingdom, we have some of the lowest breastfeeding rates in the whole of Europe, and there are wide socioeconomic disparities. Investment in breastfeeding support is crucial.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I will pick up where the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), left off. I saw from
the report that there was extensive consultation with Mumsnet. Why is there not a more specific recommendation in the report for more comprehensive breastfeeding support? What the hon. Gentleman says is correct, but it would have been good to see it in the report. During the Committee’s visit to Blackpool, were the cuts to the Breastfeeding Network’s star buddies programme mentioned? That service was lost in 2017.

Dr Williams: I thank the hon. Lady for those questions. One of the Committee’s early reports of this session was about childhood obesity. We made specific recommendations in that report that we have not necessarily repeated in this one.

We saw many wonderful things in Blackpool. We did not learn about the specific service to which the hon. Lady refers, but we did learn that many services have come under a lot of financial pressure. Even though there was some Big Lottery investment for transformation, services still needed to be cut, which sounds counterintuitive.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for conception to age two—first 1,001 days, which is slightly more long-term than the first 1,000 days of life, but not nearly as ambitious as the first 1,000 years of life, to which the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) erroneously referred. I am also the chairman of the charity Parent Infant Partnership UK. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) for referring to Sally Hogg, one of our staff members, and Beckie Lang, our chief executive, who gave evidence.

I welcome the report, and particularly the ambitious way that the hon. Gentleman has described it as the “second revolution” in early years services. He is absolutely dedicated to the whole subject, which is so important, and which many of us have been banging on about for some time. I have two questions. First, a slight disappointment is the shortage of space given to the case for investment. The hon. Gentleman knows as well as I do that, as we said in our all-party group report, “Building Great Britons”, the cost of child neglect is £15 billion a year, and the cost of maternal perinatal mental illness is £8.1 billion; that is £23 billion each year that we are spending on getting it wrong. Does he agree that we need to make the case that investment in this area will save substantial amounts financially and, more importantly, socially? The Treasury needs to understand that it is a serious investment case for the future.

Secondly, I approve of what the report says about locally delivered and joined-up services—a point that we put forward in our report, too. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is also a case, which we have made in the past, that that should be time-dated? Certainly, it should not take more than five years for every local area to have a united, joined-up, coherent and co-ordinated strategy for delivering this. It also needs to be measured, just as adoption scorecards were used at the Department for Education to measure the quality of the service delivery, so that it is not just a tick-box exercise. If we can get those two things right, the quality of the delivery will be much greater.

Dr Williams: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his advice and input at the start of the inquiry, and for the work that he has done as the chair of the all-party group, which is about the first 1,001 days—what is a day between friends? The economic case is exceptionally strong, and I am sure that the Minister has heard him make it eloquently. We all need to work together to make sure that we put the case to the Treasury. Ultimately, those spending decisions will have to be made in the comprehensive spending review; that feels like an opportune time.

The hon. Gentleman suggested that we ensure that there is a timeframe, that the commitment is not open-ended, and that local authorities have plans within a short time. We learned in our inquiry that local authorities are often left to just get on with it. The Committee felt that there was a need for much more central control and measurement, and for more accountability by central Government.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) on setting the scene so very well, and I thank the Chair of the Committee, the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), and the other members of the Committee for all that they have done to produce what I regard as a very helpful and significant publication.

The Government do not provide financial or practical help for parents of multiples. That needs to change. If someone is blessed with twins, triplets or more, they are on their own. What consideration did the Committee give to addressing this issue, as we have many concerns in this Chamber about the two-child tax credit limit?

Secondly, each year thousands of parents are forced to go back to work when their baby is still critically ill, as provisions for maternity and paternity leave are inadequate. Again, what consideration did the Committee give to combating this? It is not unreasonable to extend statutory leave and pay for parents whose baby is admitted to neonatal care by a week for every week that their baby stays in hospital. I will just explain that, because I may have rushed through it as quickly as I can, in my usual quick way. The parent of a baby who is premature, and whose peers at four months are rolling over, will be told by a health visitor not to worry, as their baby is not considered to be four months old. However, the fact is that when it comes to wages and money, that baby is considered to be that age, and the cost is £2,256 per family, so there is a financial strain.

Thirdly and lastly, nearly three quarters of multiple birth families get no discount on their childcare costs, and for triplets those costs can be as high as £2,500 per month. It is quite clear that that is not sustainable; unfortunately, it usually rings the death knell for someone’s career. What consideration was given to that issue in this report?

Dr Williams: I thank the hon. Member for so eloquently making the case on an issue that we did not look at specifically in the report; we did not look at multiple-child families. However, we made some comments in a more general way.

I will make two points in response. The first is that providing services to families is not enough. The whole environment in which they live, including the poverty that many families find themselves living in, is probably as important as the provision of services. The second point, which we make in the report, is that we should consider the impact on the early years in all policies as a principle—as a “health in all policies” principle—and
we should particularly consider the impact of all policies on the developing brain of children. We state that very clearly as a recommendation in our report.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) on chairing an absolutely transformative report, and I also congratulate all the other members of the Health and Social Care Committee for their excellent work in putting the report together. All too often, trauma has been excluded from the work that we have done; we as a society have not recognised the importance of trauma in a young child’s life. I think trauma is at the root of many societal issues, as the hon. Gentleman says.

My question is on the work that the hon. Gentleman said had been done to involve fathers. What are the recommendations to involve fathers further, and to make sure that the system does not exclude them? Also, a number of grandparents, particularly paternal grandparents, who come to my surgeries feel excluded, but very much want to be involved in the first years, because those are the transformative years.

Dr Williams: I thank the hon. Member for the contribution that she has made to the Health and Social Care Committee, and to our thoughts in developing these ideas. We learned during our inquiry that fathers often feel excluded—systematically excluded. Much of the literature and many of the interventions are targeted at mothers. Culturally, services tend to push fathers a little bit further away, rather than bringing them in.

We recommend that the healthy child programme becomes a healthy family programme, and of course we know that every family is different. Families have different members; in some families, grandparents play a huge role, and in others, a lesser role. Our main recommendation is about a cultural emphasis, or a cultural change, in the healthy child programme, to make it a more holistic family experience.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on a very thoughtful—indeed, excellent—speech, and I look forward to reading the report in full. I am also very grateful to him for the work that he does on the all-party parliamentary group on the prevention of adverse childhood experiences.

I will talk a little about the service in my area through which mums who may be prone to post-natal depression are identified, even prior to conception. If men and women who are thinking of conceiving have a history of mental illness, or perhaps even fairly low-level depression or anxiety, they are identified, and the mental health support team work with that couple throughout pregnancy and then after the child is born. I note that my hon. Friend identified mental health as one of the key issues in relation to adverse childhood experiences, but would he welcome a wider roll-out of this kind of work, to support children’s first years?

Dr Williams: I thank my hon. Friend for emphasising maternal mental health. The Government have made significant progress in improving services, particularly for people with more severe perinatal health problems, but we still have too many cases where people are likely to develop mental health problems, even if those problems are not predicted, and who say they have mental health problems in the perinatal period, but services do not detect those problems. The National Childbirth Trust has estimated that perhaps up to 50% of mothers with perinatal mental health problems never get asked about their mental health. It is welcome that some areas of the country are responding to that issue in an assertive way and seeking to prevent perinatal mental health problems, rather than just detecting them early. However, we are left with a lottery, whereby some areas do this work exceptionally well, and other areas still have to catch up.

The idea of a local authority-led plan, with some central accountability, might help to bring the kind of services that are obviously being provided already in Dewsbury to many other parts of the country.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): May I, too, thank the Committee for its excellent report?

As Members are aware, tackling inequalities is part of my brief and, frankly, there is no more obvious place to start than in the very early years. If we can get all children a good start, we will not only be well on the way to making life better for them, but will, as the hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) has observed, make savings for the taxpayer, too. I encourage him to continue pushing this work. As he is aware, prevention is very much at the heart of this Secretary of State’s agenda, and what we can do in the first 1,000 days is clearly a big part of prevention.

I note that the hon. Gentleman will meet the Leader of the House very shortly. He will find that she is very enthusiastic about and receptive to a lot of the themes that are discussed in this report, so my message—indeed, my plea—to him is this: please carry on with this work.

Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): It is the end of the time for the statement and questions about it. Thank you all very much. We move on to the next debate.
Carrier Strike Strategy

1.58 pm

Robert Courts (Winton) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered carrier strike strategy and its contribution to UK defence.

It is a great honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. May I at the outset refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests?

I thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) and my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), who are co-sponsors of the debate. We will each deal with one of a trident of points, namely the strategy for operating large carriers, which I anticipate I will largely deal with; the foreign policy element; and a celebration of the industrial impact of the large defence procurement policy being rolled out by this country. My overall ask of the Minister is for an overarching national carrier strategy, to deal with every aspect of this afternoon’s discussion.

I will start by placing myself on the date spectrum, as it were. One of my earliest memories is of HMS Hermes returning from the Falklands war. I was very young at the time, but I remember very well that very large grey carrier nosing slowly into Portsmouth harbour, surrounded by many small ships welcoming it back. I was particularly struck by the fact that she was rusted and battered from having been at sea for months on end—battered but victorious at the end of that unique campaign. I well remember the white uniforms of the sailors lined up in perfect formation on the deck, and the noises of our little Sea Harriers, which in the freezing south Atlantic of 1982 had proved themselves to be an air defence system second to none.

HMS Hermes was laid down during world war two as HMS Elephant, the last of the Centaur-class of light fleet carriers. She entered service in 1957 as an angled-deck carrier before being converted into a commando helicopter carrier, and then being adapted again with a ski jump to operate the then new Sea Harrier, which was coming into service. We have not had large fleet carriers since the decommissioning of the Invincible-class HMS Eagle and HMS Ark Royal at the end of the 1970s, and the absence of the Royal Navy from the big carrier game has been sorely noted by the Navy and the nation.

The Sea Carrier was unquestionably a brilliant aircraft but was limited in its range and payload, while the RAF’s land-optimised Harrier was severely limited by the absence of an air-to-air radar, meaning that it was never an adequate fleet air arm aircraft. While that Harrier-Invincible class concept—the combination of those small carriers and the vertical take-off and landing jets—was a potent combination in the unique circumstances of the south Atlantic, or in the north Atlantic as part of NATO groups hunting Russian submarines, there is no doubt that the inability to operate conventional fast jets of the nature of the Phantoms and Buccaneers that we lost at the end of the 1970s has severely restricted the power that Britain can exercise. The country has mourned that loss ever since, resulting in Governments of all colours seeking to restore that capability.

The years have shown that although the end of empire has meant a smaller country, it has not meant a retreat from expeditionary warfare. Every 10 years at least, Britain has been involved in a capacity that has meant it has required expeditionary air power, often from sea. The country’s desire to express power and its values has not diminished at any stage over the course of the past 40 years. In 1966, the country took the decision to run down the fixed-wing carrier fleet, which was part of a series of extraordinarily inept defence decisions taken during that time. I am not making a party political point, as all Governments were involved. Within 10 years, that decision was regretted. In a curiously British fudge, to get around the politics of why we were not having aircraft carriers anymore—except we were—the three Invincible-class carriers were called through-deck cruisers. That always amuses me; it strikes me as the most absurdly daft political euphemism imaginable.

Although the ambition to return to the big carrier game is long standing, the political chicanery around re-establishing carrier capacity has meant that the philosophical, strategic concept of what big carriers are for, how they are to be used, who with, and under what circumstances, is lacking. To a large extent, that culture has been lost, and we need to re-establish it. I suggest that now is the time to do so, because so much of carrier design throughout history has been British, be it the first carriers such as HMS Furious during the first world war; the angled flight deck that came in with the advent of fast jets at the end of the second world war and in the 1950s; or the ski jump in the 1980s. British technology and British ideas were leading the world, with others having no alternative but to follow. The same is true now: we are not the only people using the F-35B, but we are the only country in the world using it in combination with aircraft carriers designed from the keel up in order to support that aircraft. We are not the only people using the F-35, but I can say with total confidence that the aircraft carriers we are using are better than anyone else’s.

The return of Britain to that big carrier game must also be accompanied by a strategic philosophy of what carriers are about and how they are to be used. For 20 years or so there has been a tacit, if not expressed, understanding that Britain will probably not act alone in another military conflict, or at least not a major one. We will act with allies, most likely with NATO, and hardly ever without the Americans offering support in one form or another. It is sadly inconceivable that we could undertake an operation such as the Falklands again. In 1982, we had approximately 60 destroyers and frigates. That taskforce comprised 127 ships, consisting of 43 royal naval vessels, 22 from the Royal Fleet Auxiliary and 62 merchant ships. At the end of the 1980s, the Royal Navy had two aircraft carriers, seven amphibious ships, 13 destroyers and 35 frigates. After the 2010 strategic defence review, their combined number declined to approximately 19, and remains at roughly that level. In November 2018, there were 75 commissioned ships in the Royal Navy. Twenty of those are major surface combatants, including six guided missile destroyers—the Type 45s, which are primarily air defence destroyers—as well as 13 frigates and the new aircraft carrier.

Let us look at what a modern carrier group demands of a modern Navy, so that we can match what we are asking for with what we currently have available. We need to think innovatively about how to address what we need and what we have. No carrier strike group is a
fixed body; its composition depends on the circumstances, what it is being asked to do, and the allies it is operating with.

If we look at the US Navy, we will see that a typical carrier strike group would include the supercarrier—of course, we would have a supercarrier—and the carrier air wing. The Americans would have one or two Aegis guided missile cruisers of the Ticonderoga class and a destroyer squadron with two or three guided missile destroyers of the Arleigh Burke class, which are roughly comparable—I stress the word “roughly”—to the Type 45s. That is a multi-mission surface combatant, used primarily for air defence, and it is air defence and under-surface defence with which I am particularly concerned. The Americans would have two attack submarines, which would be used to screen the carrier group against other submarines and surface combatants, and they would of course have support ships.

The Italians, who also have a carrier battle group, would have the carrier, two destroyers, two support ships and three amphibious support ships. However, they may have to accept that they would need to expand or to operate with allies if they were to go into a near-peer environment.

This is not a lament for lost naval power, although I make no secret of the fact that, as far as I am concerned, we do not spend enough on defence. Our armed forces are constantly being asked to do too much with too little, and I will not even start on the pastoral aspects of armed forces funding, the combination of pay and conditions and the overall offer, which is a serious issue for recruitment and retention. I do not have time this afternoon to start on that topic. I know that whatever the Minister can say publicly, he almost certainly agrees with me, and I accept that I should be making this plea not to him but to the Treasury. However, I ask the Ministry of Defence to give serious strategic thought to how the carriers are likely to be used and with whom, to ensure—putting it bluntly—that we have sufficient mass and capability to ensure that there is space to be able to sustain loss or damage, either during a conflict or in its immediate aftermath. If we do not do that, we will probably be unable to use those carriers at all.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman is making a superb case. There is a great need for the supply chain to be in place in order to repair and build again, and I would like the benefits of that supply chain to be spread across the whole of the United Kingdom. I know that rebuilding and repairing can take place only in specific places, but none the less there is a need for that supply chain to be representative of the four regions. Does the hon. Gentleman think that such a supply chain is in place and that all the regions are getting the benefit of it?

Robert Courts: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that excellent point. I will refer to it in a little more detail shortly and I know that some of my hon. Friends will, too. I am keen to make the point that while the carriers are big grey ships that live in Portsmouth, they are not purely a Portsmouth matter. They have been built by constituents in all our areas and by companies across the whole United Kingdom. That has sustained the building of the carriers, but we need to ensure that they can be maintained and kept in service for decades to come. For that reason—it is exactly the point that the hon. Gentleman made—I am asking the Minister to consider a strategy.

We need a whole-Government approach. It is no good us just looking at this purely as a Ministry of Defence issue. I am conscious that I am asking the Minister to do more than is in his power, but it has to be a cross-Government approach. We have to look at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to see whether we have the industrial base to ensure that the supply chain that built the carriers remains in place to sustain and maintain them in the years ahead. The hon. Gentleman’s point is absolutely the point I wish to make.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. He is making a brilliant speech. I am just thinking about the point he made earlier about the improbability or unlikeliness of us using the carrier fleet to act unilaterally. Although it might be difficult to imagine such circumstances, we cannot rule them out. There may be a time when we will have to act unilaterally, possibly on a smaller scale than the Falklands conflict. It is also not strictly easy to make a comparison between the carrier fleet today and what we sent to the Falklands. The capabilities are infinitely greater, even if it is smaller in size.

Robert Courts: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who must have read my speech in advance, because I will go on to make exactly that point. If he will forgive me, rather than respond directly to his intervention I will move on to the next part of my speech.

In the Falklands, as I have said, we had approximately 60 destroyers and frigates as escorts. Of those, eight destroyers and 15 frigates were part of the taskforce. In the course of that conflict, four of those were lost and many more were damaged, some very seriously. The initial concern is that a similar impact today would destroy about one third of the Royal Navy’s air defence fleet, which would be unsustainable. Of course, we need more than the minimum deployed in case such damage takes place. I appreciate, as my hon. Friend said, that history never repeats itself exactly, and I entirely accept that the Falklands was a one-off, probably unique event. We would need many more ships available if we were looking to support an invasion force, as we were then, particularly when operating at the other end of the world, a long way from supply chains. I entirely accept that, and the parallels are not precise.

I accept entirely that the Type 45s are vastly more capable than the Type 42s that they replaced. It is also true that they are the best in the world as air defence destroyers. Essentially, they combine the Ticonderoga and Arleigh Burke mission platform into one. They are better than each of them on a platform-to-platform basis, but it is not always the case that we can do the job with fewer. The Type 42s were the cutting-edge destroyers of their day, but as soon as the Falklands war started, we found their weaknesses ruthlessly exposed, particularly with regard to the survivability of damage. That was so horrifyingly exposed in the case of HMS Sheffield. I simply suggest that there comes a point where we need mass.
Although I want us to be able to act unilaterally—I do not disagree with my hon. Friend at all—we need to consider that in most cases we will not be doing that, so I simply ask the Government to consider a strategy for that. I am instinctively very reluctant to follow a line of argument that says that because a single platform is more capable than what it replaced, we can make do with less. I say that simply because all these high-tech platforms—this is true across the whole military capability—can turn out to be horribly vulnerable in ways we do not expect. I am thinking of the USS Cole incident with the speedboat packed with explosives. I am thinking of small drones, cheaply and easily available on the internet, that are packed full of explosives in a swarm capability, such that they overwhelm even the most potent defensive systems. I am thinking of the carrier killer missiles that we know are being developed by some potential adversaries. We can already see where the threats are. I simply say no more than this: while I accept that the parallels are not precise and the capability is streets ahead of what we saw when I was a child, there comes a point where we need mass, and we need to think about how we are going to provide that, given our finances.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an outstanding contribution that I cannot stop listening to. I pay tribute to him. As well as capability, there is another basis for mass and numbers, which is that we have commitments spread around the globe, including commitments to our allies. It does not matter how good the platform is; to maintain those commitments, we also need numbers.

Robert Courts: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I could not agree more with him. If we look at the ratio of ships available in 1982 against the number deployed in the taskforce, we can see that the Navy was highly tasked as it was. There has been no downsizing in the amount of commitments that we have practically.

The Government are addressing that in many ways, and I entirely applaud the Type 31e concept, which would mean we can try to rebuild mass with a smaller, perhaps cheaper, modular type of ship that we can export. We can perhaps have some platforms so that a cutting-edge Type 45 is not needed to deal with anti-piracy operations, but instead a smaller corvette-type frigate could be used. I entirely agree with that. The hon. Gentleman’s essential point is right: there comes a point where mass is needed because no ship, however good it is, can be in more than one place at any one time. I could not agree more with him.

My point is that countermeasures are being developed for all the threats I have mentioned—drones, speedboats and so on—but as von Moltke said, “no plan survives contact with the enemy”. It is equally the case, as I have referred to in the case of the Type 42, that no platform’s wartime capability ever quite matches up to its paper peacetime capability, because no war ever takes place if the other guy does not think he also has a chance. As much as we think our platforms are great, others are looking at ways to undermine them. They only have to be right one time out of 100 and they will cause us damage. There is a time when mass is required.

I know the Government are thinking along those lines already, and I welcome the October announcement that the Royal Netherlands navy will send a warship to be part of the carrier battle group for the first operational tour. That is an important part of the strand of thinking that the warship will form part of a combined NATO battle group. However, I suggest that a broader strategy is required to involve other allies. It is easily foreseeable that allies may not wish to take part in all operations, such as when France—a very close ally—decided that it did not wish to be part of the action we undertook in 2003. That is perfectly understandable, but it should not mean that the UK’s carrier group is unable to put to sea because a certain ally does not wish to take part. The MOD has refused to be drawn thus far on exactly which vessels will deploy, but part of my ask for a strategy is for that thinking to be fleshed out to ensure we can go to sea in all circumstances in terms of numbers, capacity and national partners. We need to ensure we address all the different possibilities.

Those possibilities must also include potential operations. Because it is a fleet carrier and a return to the big carrier concept that we have lost in the past, I have tended to think in terms of fleet carrier and carrier strike operations, but I know the Government are thinking about the utilisation of the carrier in the littoral role. That will mean we have different troops and machines on board, and the support vessels required will be different, too. Coming back to the point made by hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), in 1982 we had sufficient mass that we could put together a taskforce over a weekend and go to sea. That is not likely to be possible anymore, because we simply do not have the mass or the numbers. We will have to think in advance about how we will do that for each potential likely scenario.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent and comprehensive speech. He will note that the carriers are being used in the littoral role, which they are not designed for. Does he lament the decommissioning without replacement of HMS Ocean, and note the excellent work that Intrepid and Fearless did in that role during the south Atlantic conflict?

Robert Courts: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. The Secretary of State recently made an announcement regarding ships that will take on at least some of the capabilities of HMS Ocean, with the commercial vessels refitted to take helicopters in the littoral role. Essentially, yes—I do mourn the loss of HMS Ocean, although I note that she required a heavy refit at the time, and there was an economic case surrounding that. I could not agree more that we should have a proper littoral capability with a platform designed for it, which was the essence of the hon. Gentleman’s point. Although the carriers will have a littoral role, it is not something that they are really designed for, and it strikes me that we will keep them as far out to sea as possible if we are in any kind of near-peer environment.

Without the strategic thought and overarching strategy that I urge, we risk being faced with a wonderful carrier capability that simply cannot be used without running an unacceptable risk to the carriers, or to the Royal Navy’s overall capability. I do not know whether many
hon. Members have read General Shirreff’s novel “War With Russia”. It is worth reading. General Shirreff describes a British Prime Minister who, desperate to make a strong political gesture, sent the new Queen Elizabeth carrier to sea without an adequate escort, with the result that she was sent to the bottom by a ruthless Russian regime, which had been listening for months to the carrier’s precise acoustic signature, as we can guarantee all our potential adversaries in the world will be doing at this very moment. The book is meant as a warning; it is one that we should all take seriously.

I will try to speed up, as I know that others wish to speak. I am not talking just about royal naval ships; the biggest change in British maritime strength post-Falklands lies in the drastic reduction of merchant vessels sailing under the British flag. In 1982, approximately half the taskforce was requisitioned—the Royal Navy merchant reserve. These days, for such a capacity, the Government would have to look at chartering foreign vessels, with everything that that would mean—although I accept, as my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) said, that that may not fully reflect what we are doing. Again, it is part of the strategy, and something that we should look at.

I have spoken mostly about escort warships, and will now spend a little time talking about the aircraft. Each carrier can have up to 36 aircraft embarked, and we are expecting a first squadron of 12 for an initial operating capability to be ready shortly, with two by 2023. I welcome the Secretary of State’s announcement on 11 February that the US marines’ F-35Bs will be ready for the carrier’s first deployment cruise. That is good news, not just because it means that the carrier will be operational sooner than it otherwise would have been.

It seems to provide a potential template for future operations, with embedded, close co-operation with allies to achieve our common military aims.

However, as central as our relationship with the Americans is and always should be to our defence and to NATO, I suggest that we look further. Italy, Japan and Turkey, all of which are scheduled to operate the F-35B, are all potential partners—I know that the decision has not been made—for Team Tempest, the next generation carrier air groups. Italy, as I noted, has one of its own.

Rather than speaking just about our defence and military prowess, let us consider the ability to project world-leading global air power around the world as an opportunity to act as a force for good—to defend democracy and human rights, and to defend the weak and downtrodden. Clearly, there is a major foreign policy aspect that should be considered in partnership with the defence agenda that I have laid out. I ask for that strategy to be adopted across the Government, in the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Defence and BEIS.

I welcome the announcement that a deployment to the Pacific will be part of the first Queen Elizabeth deployment. A combined Defence and Foreign Office strategy should be worked up to address those circumstances—and I do not mean purely for warfare. Let us never forget the prestige of the Royal Navy. Its soft power, and by reflection that of Britain itself, is enormous. It demonstrates the very best of British skill and professionalism, and I am delighted to see from my time on the armed forces parliamentary scheme—I am on the Navy scheme this year—that the Royal Navy is once again utilising its enormous prestige to bring together parties abroad, who otherwise would not necessarily be able to come together, in a diplomatic capacity. How much more could be done with world-beating carrier capability as a showcase for British industrial and military prowess? Let us see a tie-up with the Foreign Office, DFID and the Department for International Trade.

My last few remarks will celebrate industry. As I have said, they are not just big grey ships that benefit the people of Portsmouth, although they unquestionably do. They also benefit the whole United Kingdom, because they have been built by our constituents in companies all across the country. UK industry is set to benefit from a 15% build share of the jets—£13 billion to British companies. UK shipbuilding employs 23,000 people and contributes £1.7 billion a year to the UK economy.

We are lucky to see coming into service the finest ships of their type anywhere in the world, crewed by the most professional Navy. They are bringing the glory of
the Royal Navy’s history together with the technological, industrial prowess that is our hallmark for the future. The carriers can help us to unite new friends around the world in times of peace, and to defend freedom in times of war. They are the very best of our country, and I wholeheartedly celebrate them, as I hope we all can.

2.29 pm

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): May I correct my friend and colleague, the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts)? Women will be serving on the aircraft carrier, too; it will not just be men.

Robert Courts: The hon. Lady is quite right to correct me. I meant “men” in the global sense of “humanity”, but of course I was referring to men and women. I am sorry about that.

Ruth Smeeth: Moving on, may I alert the Chamber to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests? I am also a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the armed forces, and its lead on the Royal Navy—something that I am incredibly proud of, as a woman, to be doing. You are going to get some grief today, my friend.

Let me briefly give my own perspective on some issues that have been already been addressed. The Queen Elizabeth class is exquisite: its ships are beautiful and will be a wonderful addition to our Royal Navy, as long as we ensure that we have enough crew to staff them—I will not say “man” them. The people who will serve on those platforms are incredibly important and we face challenges in recruiting them, but today I wish to speak about the wider military family, because the people who make the platforms are just as important for our national security.

Our capacity to continue to be a tier 1 military country depends on having a wider military-industrial complex to build our national security capabilities. Whenever I visit Rosyth shipyard or other defence establishments, I am always struck not only by people’s professionalism, but by their dedication. As the Minister knows, they build our ships because they know that their friends and family may well serve on them. It is important that they know that they are doing a perfect job to ensure that the best possible platforms are afforded to our service personnel—the best in the world for the Royal Navy.

The Queen Elizabeth class is an extraordinary feat of engineering. Some 11,000 people in six shipyards have touched the pieces of metal that were used to build its extraordinary capabilities. The platform represents £6.2 billion of capacity and equipment, not counting the F-35s that will be on it, or even the tableware that our service personnel will eat off; as MP for the Potteries, I am sure that the Minister will reassure me that the tableware will be purchased from my constituency. Please, Minister—give me a nod.

I want to consider the aircraft carrier in the widest possible context, because it demonstrates the challenges that we face in the sector, not only in procurement for the carrier itself, but in securing the carrier strike group over the longer term. It has been 12 years since 2007, when the then Secretary of State signed off the paperwork for the aircraft carrier and finally launched the programme to start the process of building it. Flight trials are happening this year. Even from the moment we agreed to build, it took us 12 years to get to this point, but prior to that there was a decade of debating, designing and determining the concept of our future aircraft carrier.

The project has challenged our shipyards. It has challenged us on whether we have the resources, the skillset and the domestic sovereign capability to build the platform. During the lifespan of the Queen Elizabeth class, we will have to replace the Astute programme and update and replace the Type 45. We will also have to replace the Type 23 with the Type 26, and then start talking about the Type 26’s replacement—all in the lifetime of this capability. By that point, we may even have seen one Type 31e.

Just ensuring strike group capability for the Queen Elizabeth class requires a long-term plan for procurement, so my urge, demand and request to the lovely Minister is that we look at the longer term. We need to consider the steady drumbeat of orders needed for our domestic industry to deliver the long-term capabilities that we require. We are still not sure how many fleet solid support ships we will actually get—we could probably do with three.

We should recognise how fabulous these platforms will be and what is required for their use, both from a military perspective and from one of diplomatic and soft power. We should also remember the people who made them: our constituents up and down the country. My constituency could not be more landlocked, but my constituents helped to contribute to the Astute class and the Dreadnought class. This is a national programme, with national consequences, making a national contribution to our GDP. I urge the Minister to give me my steady drumbeat of orders.

2.35 pm

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): It is an honour to speak in this debate, and an enormous honour to follow the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth)—a woman who deserves all our support and respect for her resilience and extraordinary tenacity in the face of personal challenges in her political life. She certainly has the support and respect of all hon. Members present.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): What a decent thing for the hon. Lady to say. We all associate ourselves publicly with her remarks about my hon. Friend.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. It is no hardship to commend the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North for her extraordinary resilience; all of us who believe in what this House stands for would do so. If every member of our armed forces were as resilient, tough and determined—not to mention charming—as she is, we would be able to take on the world without any trouble at all. However, let me return to the matter at hand and speak about a ship that I am particularly proud of.

The United Kingdom is a maritime nation and a coastal state. More than 90% of our trade in goods flows into and out of our ports on domestic and global sea lanes. Our trade flows remain entirely dependent on
ensuring that home waters and international waters are kept open and safe for commercial sea traffic. This year is the 80th anniversary of the start of the battle of the Atlantic, the longest battle in the history of naval warfare. What was critical then remains true: our Royal Navy’s primary responsibility is to keep the high seas safe for the free flow of our trade in goods, energy and food. It can do so only if it has the best world-leading equipment and weaponry and the advantage over potential enemies.

As an island nation, the United Kingdom was highly dependent on imported goods, even in 1939. Britain required more than 1 million tonnes of imported material every week to survive, feed our population—albeit on rations—and fight. In essence, the battle of the Atlantic was a tonnage war, in which the allies struggled to supply Britain while the axis attempted to stem the flow of merchant shipping that enabled Britain to keep fighting. From 1942, the axis also sought to prevent the build-up of allied supplies and equipment in the British Isles in preparation for the invasion of occupied Europe. The outcome of the battle was a strategic victory for the allies—the German blockade failed—but it came at great cost.

The battle of the Atlantic has been called "the longest, largest, and most complex naval battle in history", but at its essence was a critical message, which perhaps we have become a little lazy about: we are an island. Unless we choose policies to make us entirely self-sufficient, which would limit our choices dramatically, we must always invest in our Royal Navy to keep our sea lanes open.

As Brexit approaches and our view of ourselves as a maritime nation comes to the fore once again, there could be no more timely moment to discuss, and call on the Government to implement, a clear whole-of-Government strategy for our aircraft carriers and the carrier strike group of ships that sail the seas and oceans of the globe to keep the flow of goods to and from the United Kingdom’s shores as certain as possible.

Of the two new aircraft carriers being introduced into Royal Navy service, the first, HMS Queen Elizabeth, is already working her way up to full service, while the second, HMS Prince of Wales, is following closely behind. If I may, I will tell hon. Members a little more about these two extraordinary feats of British industrial design, construction, skill and innovation. I have had the honour to watch them grow from boxes of steel made in shipyards across our country and put together in Rosyth, with engineering so sophisticated that the margin of error was millimetres only on these vast steel structures. The ships have grown into their present form under the watchful eye of highly skilled shipyard workers in Rosyth, with a unique partnering relationship of industry and the Ministry of Defence with the Royal Navy. The Aircraft Carrier Alliance was the first of its kind as a procurement project. The end user was genuinely involved throughout the process to maximise value for money for the taxpayer and to create the most user-friendly vessel for the Royal Navy to live and work aboard.

In HMS Queen Elizabeth, we now have the most sophisticated and comprehensive carrier capability in the world. Her sister ship HMS Prince of Wales will be coming into service close behind her. The increasing speed of build with the second vessel demonstrates so well why ship classes get better and more finely tuned as more are built.

Perhaps it is not surprising that the Treasury decided that two was enough, at £3 billion each and a crew requirement of 800 or more sailors. We are at an all-time low in manpower terms for the Royal Navy. All those factors are important. Mind you, £3 billion for a 50-year lifespan strikes me—even as the critical friend to MOD that I am, sitting on the Public Accounts Committee—as a pretty good investment return, considering the choices the carrier group can offer Governments and NATO.

It is to be hoped that in the months ahead, as the modernising defence review progresses and real changes in the business model take place within the Department, the imbalance in funding between the three services’ top-level budgets since the 2010 strategic defence and security review will be sorted out, so that the Royal Navy can meet its activity requirements—a point which my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) raised earlier—and be able to increase its output, after nine years of trying to meet requirements and the challenges of the continuous at-sea deterrent commitment without ever quite enough funding. We want to be able to maximise the outputs—in the Royal Navy, that is time at sea—so that our sailors and our ships are out there doing what we ask them to do.

Unlike the French, who only have the Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier, the beauty of having two of these great ships is that we can ensure that we have that at-sea capability 365 days a year. I hope the Minister will reassure the House today that rumours emanating from Treasury sources that it might be fine to mothball or sell Prince of Wales are unfounded. We need two ships to provide 365 days of output.

I could talk about the Queen Elizabeth class military capability in more detail, but I think it is safe to say that my colleagues are all over that already. However, I have had the privilege to visit these ships in construction and to watch Queen Elizabeth leave Rosyth on her maiden voyage. That was a real hold-your-breath moment because she had to squeeze under the bridge with her hinged radar lowered to get out into open seas on the lowest tides in the summer of 2017.

I then had the even greater privilege of being aboard this mighty vessel on 8 December 2017, when she was formally commissioned into the Royal Navy and her ensign changed from blue to white. The Queen and I—and a few others—were inside this enormous hangar, as the Princess Royal took on the weather deck to perform the formal ceremony.

Amid all the pomp and circumstance, and the real honour of hearing my monarch speak of her own naval life, in her words, as the daughter, wife and mother of her family, who had all served in the Royal Navy, I looked at the young sailors, some of whom looked very young indeed, though that may be a reflection on me. These young men and women standing to attention before their commander-in-chief. The young sailors were simply brimming with excitement and pride at their opportunity to be the first sailors to serve on a ship that will be in service for 50 years or more—a ship that will be the cornerstone of our UK defence and military
We have restored to our naval capabilities two great ships and the opportunity to create carrier strike groups with huge reach, for the next 50 years. They are the cornerstone of a naval taskforce to project UK power and influence in many ways in the decades ahead, in a way we have been unable to for several decades. I look forward to hearing from the Minister how the Government to take full advantage of what a constantly moving afloat.

The 21st-century aircraft carrier is not only a warfighter—the only dedicated fifth generation platform in the world equipped and designed to deliver the F-35B fighter jet—but she can serve in any number of roles supporting and promoting our national interests.

As we leave the EU and seek to stand tall on the global stage once again as a sovereign nation, these platforms can provide a range of opportunities for diplomacy, intelligence gathering, trade, humanitarian support and disaster relief. That is really why we have called the debate today, because if we are to reach our stated aims of becoming once again a global-facing Britain, reaching out to old friends and new in trade and alliances, it is vital that we make full use of these extraordinary ships.

The carriers are diplomatic tools for our country—the royal yacht Britannia of the 21st century, perhaps—able to deliver a diplomatic message, hard or soft; to assist with trade delegations, as indeed HMS Queen Elizabeth has already done in New York last autumn; and to provide humanitarian relief on a scale never before seen by the UK, if needed, anywhere in the world.

The Government’s PR and official statements to date about these carriers of ours have been focused on size, tonnage and capability. All of those are impressive, but the important conversation that we need to have with the UK citizen needs to be about much more than those good stories of skills, jobs and next generation ships. As these great ships cruise our vast oceans, they will be a hub for intelligence collection and dissemination to assist all our allies in keeping our world as safe as possible. The platforms are the epitome of the vision created by our national security adviser, Sir Mark Sedwill, the fusion doctrine, which properly joins up all the strands of defensive, offensive and humanitarian activity, ordered and put into effect by Government. These great ships of ours are the epitome of fusion afloat.

The aircraft carrier in its carrier strike group, from whichever nation, is operated by navies, but is programmed by Prime Ministers and Presidents. The President of the United States receives a daily brief on the whereabouts of the US Navy carrier battle groups. The French President personally authorises the deployment intentions of the Charles de Gaulle. Leaders visit their carriers as part of their demonstration of national pride and, of course, power.
actually involved in the design and construction of the Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carriers in Glasgow. Let me mention one of the most striking aspects of being involved in the project. When I first started as a graduate at BAE Systems, the chief engineer gave us a briefing on the Queen Elizabeth class and talked about the complexity of the project. One thing he said really struck home; he put up an aerial photograph of RAF Lossiemouth and said, “You’re looking at 5.6 million square metres of real estate. We have to condense the same number of aircraft movements into 0.3% of the space. That’s how we deliver the Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carrier.”

That shows just how complex the delivery of an aircraft carrier is; an airfield is being compacted into 0.3% of the usual space, and we are trying to deliver the same intensity of operations at sea in all weather conditions. That is why, in a nutshell, an aircraft carrier is such a complex project. It is probably among the top five most complex engineering projects ever undertaken by mankind.

It is a great testament to British engineering that we have been able to achieve this capability, despite the challenges posed by the inconsistent construction runs and feast-and-famine orders that have plagued our shipbuilding industry for decades. I think that is what my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North hinted at, as did the hon. Member for Witney. He talked about the bad decisions made in the 1960s. An example is the cancellation of the CVA-01 aircraft carrier project, which was intended to be called HMS Prince of Wales and Queen Elizabeth—we got there only 40 years later. The TSR2 strategic bomber was also cancelled at that time.

It seems that history has a habit of repeating itself. I lament the very poor decisions made in the 2010 strategic defence and security review, which destroyed the Nimrod maritime patrol aircraft. That is now recognised as a failure of judgment, and we are trying to replicate what we had, but with the loss of British sovereign capability to build large fixed-wing aircraft like the Nimrod. Looking at the failure to adapt our shipbuilding capabilities for the long term, I fear that the national shipbuilding strategy has a series of flaws that we have to be aware of.

On the construction of the aircraft carrier, there was real difficulty getting match-fit again in order to deal with the scale of the project. That is largely what I was concerned about in Govan. I have a photograph of me standing in bay 1 of the ship block and outfit hall at Govan as lower block 4 was being transferred out of that hall and on to a barge in order to be taken to Rosyth. The size and beam of the aircraft carrier was dictated by the fact that the shipyard was built by a Norwegian company to build gas tankers in the late 1980s and 1990s. The width of the aircraft carrier was determined by the size of the hall. We were building it in a shipyard that was never designed or constructed to build an aircraft carrier—the whole structure of the carrier was designed around our industrial limitations.

It feels like we have not learned from the mistakes made and the constraints imposed by industry in this project, which is why we have not really looked at how the national shipbuilding strategy is getting us to upper-quartile performance in world shipbuilding. That is a glaring omission from the document. I hope that the work of the all-parliamentary group on shipbuilding and ship repair, which is bringing forward a review of the national shipbuilding strategy in the next few weeks, will offer constructive and positive suggestions of how we can improve that strategy. It is critical that we get this right.

Looking at the threat to the shipbuilding industry, in Glasgow, 2,723 people are supported on a full-time-equivalent basis by the shipbuilding industry. It supports an additional 3,220 jobs in Scotland, which speaks to the scale of the aircraft carrier project. It supported 8,000 shipyard workers in—I make a slight correction here—eight shipyards. If Scotstoun and Govan are included as separate, distinct shipyards, there are eight. Never confuse Govan and Scotstoun as a single shipyard—that is a fatal error in Glasgow.

Ruth Smeeth: I think my hon. Friend might want to raise this issue with the Minister, because that the data available on the Royal Navy website says otherwise.

Mr Sweeney: We must correct the Ministry of Defence; otherwise, some fairly indignant Glaswegians will be coming to bang on its door.

The issue goes back to the drumbeat of orders, and stability in the order book. I used to sit with colleagues in the shipyard and we would look at resource planning. We would plug in different projects and see the curve of labour demand over the next 10 to 15 years. We knew that redundancies or contractions would have to be made at some point, because the loading of the shipyard’s work programme was not smooth; there was failure by the Ministry of Defence, the Treasury—in terms of financing projects—and the industry to co-ordinate properly to ensure as stable and smooth a curve as possible. That kind of curve would have delivered learning-curve benefits, industrial efficiency and the confidence to invest in world-class infrastructure and processes, and would create a virtuous cycle that delivers a world-class, competitive edge that would mean we could sell ships around the world at a competitive price, and deliver a sustainable and growing shipbuilding industry.

If we can optimise that equation, we will be in a good place, but I fear that the national shipbuilding strategy will not address that issue. One of the symptoms is the Type 31e. It is a laudable aspiration, but the reality is that we are committing the same mistake time and again. We are going to year zero and designing and building a new platform from scratch every time. That is a total failure to understand how industry works. The Americans have been building the same class for the last 30 years, with incremental improvements to the same platform. We need to work to that sort of concept. There is no reason why we cannot adapt the Type 45 and Type 26 hulls for a number of different uses. Building the ship as a raw steel box is only about 8% of the overall capital cost; it is how it is fitted out that drives the cost into the platform. If we can get a standardised, basic ship type for each type of ship needed for the Royal Navy, we can drive efficiency into the programmes and get more hulls into the water, and build a rigorous, carrier strike battle group around the Queen Elizabeth class, which would allow us to get the bulk back into the Royal Navy.

I have spoken to the Royal Navy, which says it has 19 escorts, but it needs 24 to meet all its planning needs. The Navy needs to bridge that gap, but how will we do it? There is no explanation of how that is happening.
I would say that we need another 24 plus. We had 32 escorts as recently as 20 years ago. How do we get back to that situation? I do not think that Type 31s will solve that problem. How do we fix that issue? It is not just about looking at the aircraft carriers, which is a fantastic class of ship in isolation; it is about how we build that resilience into the carrier strike battle group. If we do not get a correct and efficient escort proposition, we will not meet that need. That goes back to getting our industrial capability correct—something that is not being addressed by the national shipbuilding strategy.

Another symptom of the problem is the fleet solid support ships competition. If you ask me, it is absolutely insane even to entertain the idea of an international competition for this, because it belies any understanding of how to drive value into the project. Looking at the fleet solid support ships, 6,700 jobs will be created or secured, including 1,800 shipyard jobs and 450 apprenticeships. Some £272 million will be recycled back into the UK economy through wages and supply of payments to the Treasury. Those figures must be weighted in the judgment for the UK bid on fleet solid support ships, and they must be weighted into the need to sustain the critical mass of industrial capability that the aircraft carrier left as a legacy at Rosyth.

In the next few years, we are potentially looking at over 1,000 job losses across the Babcock group, and at the closure of Appledore, which built the bulbous bows for the aircraft carrier. There are huge industrial capabilities at risk. Look at the Rugby site, which builds electric motors for the integrated electric propulsion system for the Type 45 and the aircraft carrier—one of the most fantastic industrial achievements of the UK. That is at risk again; General Electric proposes closing that strategically important site. These things need to be gripped by the Ministry of Defence and the Treasury, because we are losing a war of attrition on our industrial capability.

Ruth Smeeth: I want to touch on the capability that we are losing from General Electric. We have already lost one of the capabilities, which was in Kidsgrove in my constituency. We were given assurances that the capability would be sustainable long term after its redeployment to Rugby and Stafford, yet we are losing it. Industry is just not supporting us in the right way if that is not part of the sovereign skills capability and it knows there is a steady drumbeat of orders.

Mr Sweeney: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. It is critical that we look not just at the first-tier equipment manufacturers, such as BAE Systems and Rolls-Royce, in which the Government have golden shares and can direct operational decision making to an extent, but at the second and third-tier supply chains. After all, 3,000 people involved in the aircraft carrier project were in the supply chains. We need to look at the industrial capabilities that are critical to maintaining sovereign capability. It is clear that General Electric has made an operational decision to move that capability to France. That is not in the British national interest, so we need to make it clear that we will not accept that. It is as simple as that. It is the Government’s duty to make that case and use whatever leverage is required to make General Electric change its mind. The Government are there to correct negative market decisions, and that is what needs to happen to sustain our industrial capability.

My vision is of a better national shipbuilding strategy that looks to the future and the capabilities that we need to sustain, and ensures that we have a long-term capital investment proposition with the Treasury that reflects the complexity and long-term nature of shipbuilding programmes, finances them properly on a multi-year, generational basis, and invests in the capital infrastructure that is required to get our shipyards match-fit. It is a great tragedy that the world-class shipbuilding capability on the Clyde has not been realised, and that we are still building Type 26s in the same old hall built by a Norwegian company for gas tankers in the 1980s. It has served us well, but when the business case was made for building that hall in the 1980s, we sure as hell did not think we would be building aircraft carriers and Type 26 frigates in it.

This is about not just the narrow business case of one programme and the investment for building Type 26s in the shipyard, but all the other ships that will follow in its wake. This is a 50 to 60-year capital investment programme. The industrial benefit of doing that is enormous, and the Ministry of Defence has not addressed it. I hope the Minister will address that point, because it is crucial that we start to think about this in those terms. The current mentality about projects does not serve our defence industrial capability. We need a much broader view and much more integration to secure our skills base. We must infuse our ageing shipbuilding workforce with more apprentices. We need sustainable training programmes and a stable demand pipeline through programmes such as the fleet solid support ships, which should be plugged in to take up the slack that has come from the downsizing of the aircraft carrier programme.

Similarly, why are we not planning for a proper replacement for HMC Ocean, rather than retrofitting merchant vessels? That is a rather foolish and superficial way of doing it. Let us build a new helicopter landing platform, a replacement for the Albion class and a world-class shipyard that is able to deliver them. That is what we need to do to pull all this together and realise the industrial legacy of the Queen Elizabeth-class programme, which was an exemplar of British engineering. It was a truly world-class, world-leading programme.

We talk about building the space shuttle and the international space station, but the Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carrier is up there with the most complex engineering projects ever undertaken by the human race. We should have a great national celebration of that achievement. Let us make the most of the legacy.

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3.2 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I congratulate all four Members who have spoken so far. Only one of them is a member of the Defence Committee, which I have the honour to chair. Given their depth of knowledge and enormous enthusiasm, the Defence Committee will not be short of worthy members in the future. I encourage those who are not yet on it to redouble their efforts to be so at the first opportunity. The beneficiaries of their enthusiasm and breadth of knowledge will be the House and the country as a whole.

The previous speeches have not left me with as much to say as I might otherwise have said. That is an additional benefit to anybody watching the debate. I will pick and choose a few points here and there from what has been said already, and try to develop them into a theme of strategy and adversaries. When I talk
about adversaries, I am really talking about one overwhelming adversary: the Treasury. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) that, after bringing in one of the two largest vessels ever built for the Royal Navy, the Treasury might be thinking of mothballing it. I suppose that is a little better than the proposal that I heard from one George Osborne in the run-up to the 2010 election, which was to scrap the project for building the carriers completely. It is amazing how many times we have almost lost the ability to project air power from the sea. In one case, we did lose it. We lost it when we lost the Invincible class of carriers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts), in his magisterial opening speech, referred to the fact that those carriers were termed through-deck cruisers, and he was rather critical of that. This is the only minor point of correction I would make to his exemplary exposition. Those ships were from the outset aircraft carriers capable of enabling the Harrier still to offer fixed-wing coverage from the sea to the land. They were called through-deck cruisers to defeat the adversary—the Treasury. If they had been called carriers from the outset, they would never have been built. I am glad to see that my hon. Friend accepts that. Once they were safely in commission, and after a respectable number of years, it became possible to reclassify them as aircraft carriers, which is what they were always intended to be.

Of course, we very nearly had no carriers for the Falklands conflict. We only had them, as I say, because of a bit of subterfuge on the part of the admiralty. When it came to the Libya conflict—a disastrously misconceived conflict, as it happens—we had no carrier capability at all. I recall that when the decision was taken to have a gap between the phasing out of the Invincible-class carriers and HMS Queen Elizabeth’s coming into service, we did not anticipate any role for a carrier for 10 years or so. I believe that the Libyan scenario arose after something like 10 months, rather than 10 years. Guess which warship our French allies in that conflict immediately moved to the theatre? It was their one and only aircraft carrier.

Mr Sweeney: The right hon. Gentleman is making a very important point about euphemisms. Another favourite of mine is “capability holiday”, and “fitted for but not with” was a common theme on the Type 45 destroyer. Does he agree that the issue of capability holidays needs to be properly scrutinised? I do not think the Ministry of Defence has recognised the damage that the 2010 SDSR caused, in terms of the loss of maritime patrol capability and carrier capability.

Dr Lewis: The trouble with 2010 was that it was a funded defence review that was totally unstrategic. People say that the 1998 defence review was the reverse: it was very strategic, but almost totally unfunded. Our problem is that we are unable in times of peace to persuade the people in charge of the national purse strings that the best investment they can make in the long term is to have strong armed forces. If our armed forces are strong enough, we will not have to spend all that treasure, let alone all those lives, in fighting conflicts that arise as a result of our perceived weakness.

Robert Courts: My right hon. Friend is making an absolutely outstanding point. Does he agree with this summary of it? We need to have a strategic look at what we want to achieve with our strategic defence goals and then fund them, as opposed to having the funding and then seeing what we can still manage to do.

Dr Lewis: I will go some way towards acknowledging that, with this one caveat: our strategic goals cannot be defined more tightly than the ability to have a full range of military capability to meet whatever threats may reasonably be regarded as likely to arise. I am afraid that all speeches that I make about defence policy and military strategy come back to the same three basic concepts: deterrence, containment and the unpredictability of future conflict. Libya and the Falklands were unpredictable.

The only thing we can predict is that the vast majority of conflicts in which we will be engaged in the future, as in the vast majority of conflicts in the past, will arise with little or no warning significantly in advance, and that is why we have to have a comprehensive range of military capabilities. It is very difficult to persuade budget-conscious Treasury officials not to take a chance with the nation’s security. That is why the Defence Select Committee comes back time and again to the same point, which is that defence has fallen too far down our scale of national priorities. When we compare it with other high spending Departments we can see that because in the 1980s, at the stage when we faced an aggressive Soviet Union and a major terrorist threat in the form of Northern Ireland and the IRA insurgency, we spent approximately the same on defence as we spent on health and education. Now we spend four times on health and two and a half times on education as we spend on defence. We can get away with that as long as things do not go wrong, but if they do we live to regret it bitterly.

Mr Sweeney: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his indulgence in giving way. Although I do not think the decisions on spending are mutually exclusive—I think we have sufficient capacity in the state to fund all these things adequately—he makes an important point about thinking we can get away with not properly investing. I think of the predecessor of the new Prince of Wales, which was sunk by the Japanese in 1941 because there were fatal weaknesses in the battleship’s design. Its air defence systems had been scrapped because of cost-saving measures in the 1930s. Does he not agree that that is a lesson of history that we ought to probably learn if unpredictable conflicts are to emerge in future?

Dr Lewis: I wondered whether I should make a reference to that terrible event in December 1941 when the Prince of Wales and the Repulse were sunk by Japanese air power. One of the main problems was that they were sent out with inadequate protection and inadequate escorts, and, as I recall from my history books, no air cover whatever. Having said that, we can say that HMS Queen Elizabeth has already claimed one victory. Given that, as I said earlier, the Treasury can be regarded as the main adversary, I think the Treasury has probably sunk more ships in the Royal Navy than any other enemy we have faced. It was gratifying to see a bit of advance retaliation in that HMS Queen Elizabeth appears to have sunk the Chancellor’s visit to the Communist...
Chinese without even having embarked on its first operational voyage. [Laughter.] I hoped to get a laugh at that point, but behind that is a serious point that relates to what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Witney a moment ago in an intervention: the Government need to have an overall strategy. All too often they look both ways with regard to countries that do not mean us a lot of good.

Let us take the example of China. Before I come to the more recent issue of its behaviour in the South China sea, let us go back to 2013 when I served on the Intelligence and Security Committee, which devoted a great deal of time to a study of foreign penetration of British critical national infrastructure. That was the overall title of the report that we produced, but in reality it was all about Huawei and the way in which that giant Chinese Communist telecommunications firm had penetrated British telecom and been brought into the system without Ministers having even been alerted until it had happened. I remember being somewhat fazed when, within a matter of a few weeks of the publication of that report, with all its dire warnings about the need for it to never happen again, I saw a picture of the then Prime Minster David Cameron shaking hands with the chief executive of Huawei on the doorstep of No. 10 on the basis of some great new deal that was being proposed.

We need to understand that if there is something so sensitive about the idea that a ship of the Royal Navy could even dream of going into the Pacific ocean that a major trade trip from the Chancellor of the Exchequer of the United Kingdom to China has to be called off, there is something terribly wrong both with the attitude of the Communist Chinese in calling off the trip, as it were, and the attitude of the Treasury in wanting the Chancellor to undertake it. I will leave the point at that moment, unless I get some in-flight refuelling from the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Sweeney: Does the right hon. Gentleman think that the concept of ITAR—international traffic in arms regulations—which is a NATO standard, should be extended to such spheres to address the insidiousness of the new penetration by foreign powers?

Dr Lewis: I think that is a very perceptive suggestion. When it comes to the issue of keeping the country safe from threats to our way of life, which now take on new and altogether more significant forms that are much more difficult to recognise because they do not operate at a level that would automatically trigger the same sort of alarm bells as traditional military threats, the support that I find as chairman of the Defence Committee from Members of all four parties represented on it is absolutely outstanding. The House should acknowledge more than it does the high degree of consensus among defence-minded people in all the major parties, irrespective of occasional disagreements on specific aspects of defence now and again.

I want to bring my remarks to a conclusion by talking about the 1998 Labour Government strategic defence review, which I described as unfunded but highly strategic. It was a very good review. If the funds had been available for it, it would have been an outstanding success. At that time in 1998 the threat from the Soviet Union had gone away and it was hoped that we would not have to consider a major confrontation in Europe. So the thinking behind that review went something like this: given that we do not anticipate our armed forces having to be engaged in the European theatre in future, it follows that if they are to be engaged on a significant scale anywhere, it will be at some considerable distance from Europe. Given that we no longer are a global imperial power with a network of strategic bases around the world from which to intervene, it follows that we need a concept that enables us to have a movable strategic base. At the heart of that strategic defence review of 1998 was the concept of the sea base, which had two central pillars. One was carrier strike and the other was the amphibious taskforce.

Carrier strike was to enable us to exert air power to the land from the sea, and the amphibious taskforce was to enable us to insert land forces on to territory likewise from the sea, taking the whole strategic concept into a way in which we could travel to the theatre where the need to intervene militarily applied.

Only a year ago we faced yet another major potential crisis. It was widely reported in January last year that the core ships—HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark of the amphibious taskforce—were going to be pensioned off 15 years before their due date. I can honestly say that the most influential report of the 27 so far produced by the Defence Committee since I have been chairing it was the one that we brought out in February 2018, which described the proposal to lose our ability to exert land power from the sea as militarily illiterate. I absolutely welcome the intervention of the Secretary of State for Defence, who could see the risk and what was going to happen. Some people have criticised the modernising defence programme for not being being quite as substantial as they expected. However, that is to miss the point, because although I welcome the concept of the fusion doctrine, which my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed referred to, there was a way in which it posed a risk to the future of our armed forces. The way in which the defence theory for the future was being amalgamated in the national security capability review with newer threats, such as those from cyberspace and disinformation, was conceptually sound but economically dangerous. I shall explain after taking an intervention from my hon. Friend. Anne-Marie Trevelyan: On that point, the great challenge of the fusion doctrine, whose strategic vision is really intelligent, as my right hon. Friend says, is that, as ever—it is difficult to say out loud—the adversary in the Treasury and those who were in my view driving the policy forward saw it as an opportunity to take hold of the defence budget and bring it into a greater whole, without fully understanding the need for hard power to remain in our national picture.

Dr Lewis: I am delighted with that intervention, which has saved me at least the next two paragraphs of what I was going to say. That was precisely the danger. The defence budget was being wrapped up inside an overall defence and security budget and we were being told that that national security capability review would have to be fiscally neutral. So effectively, if £56 billion was going to be put together overall, and if more money was to be spent to meet the new sorts of threats we are constantly told about—threats in space or cyberspace, or threats of disinformation that are not really new but
are moving into new dimensions—every £1 received for those threats would mean £1 less for the Army, the Royal Navy or the Royal Air Force. That is why there were leaks—clearly authoritative—about potential cuts in each service, including about the loss of HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark, which would have happened if the Secretary of State for Defence had not fought and won the political battle to strip out the defence elements from the national security capability review and have a separate modernising defence programme. That meant that he was no longer caught in that fiscal or financial ambush.

Let us not be too complacent in congratulating ourselves on the advent of such marvellous vessels, because they very nearly did not happen, first because of the Treasury, back in 2009-10, and secondly because even as we brought in half the concept of the sea base—carrier strike—we were in danger, right up to a few months ago, of losing the other half of the concept. That was amphibious capability, without which we would not have had a rounded overall capability to intervene strategically in whatever theatre of the world a threat might arise unpredictably. Believe me, when a threat arises in the future, it will be unpredictable and we will be lucky if we are sufficiently equipped to meet it. That luck depends on the advocacy of people such as those we have heard from this afternoon, in every party represented in the debate. I hope that my hon. Friend who speaks for the Scottish National Party, the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), will presently make a speech and keep up the tradition.

3.24 pm

Vernon Coaker: It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), the Chair of the Defence Committee, which does such excellent work and produces such outstanding reports, helping to defend our country and the broader alliance to which we belong. I congratulate the hon. Members for Witney (Robert Courts) and for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) on their contribution to bringing the debate about.

I, like the Select Committee Chair, have been struck by the unanimity of views expressed and the power of the comments made in the debate. I particularly wanted to take part because, as everyone knows, I am a big supporter of defence and of increased expenditure, but also because I have a sense of frustration, although not with the Ministry of Defence. I feel frustration with our country and with Government as a whole, given the number of debates I have taken part in where Members have said it is crucial that defence and foreign policy objectives, and international development objectives, should be married together. I want the Minister to take that point away; but this cannot be another of those debates where we say such things and, a year later, the right hon. Member for New Forest East gives another report, and the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed or, indeed, my hon. Friend the Members for Stoke-on-Trent North and for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) make another outstanding speech explaining that foreign policy objectives must be linked to defence objectives. That is what happens. I am doing no more than expressing my opinion about what is happening, and that is the subject of my contribution.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman, so may I draw his attention, as an example of what he is asking for, to the recently published Africa strategy? That is a cross-Government strategy drawing together strategies from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department for International Development and the Ministry of Defence. That is exactly what is happening.

Vernon Coaker: I accept that that has been published, but I want to say something further to the point that the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed made, about the UK citizen. My point—and this shows how much work has to be done—is that, as the Defence Committee Chair said, on 11 February the Secretary of State for Defence makes a speech about where the new aircraft carrier will go on its first operational tour, and then a trip by the Chancellor to China is cancelled. Then a furious row erupts, apparently. If that is wrong, it is wrong, but that is what was reported. Somehow or other we have to have an approach where we do not have a row about it and the whole blame goes to the Chinese for refusing to accept that we have a perfect right for our aircraft carriers to go where we want. Instead, it became “Well, yes, the Chinese shouldn’t have done that”—but why are we worrying about it as well?

I have a broader point to make. It is not only about the need to win the debate and the argument in Government. The Chair of the Defence Committee has made the argument time and again, and so have the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North and the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), who speaks for the Scottish National party. Where on earth is the engagement with the UK public? My constituents would see massive spending on tackling the terrorist threat as something to pile money into. The debate about whether we should spend billions of pounds on aircraft carriers is a totally different concept for them: why should we be spending that money? I agree with spending it, but have we won that debate with the British public? I very much doubt it. I would say that there is a need, with respect to Russia and China. On the middle east, people might get it, although they could say “You can already bomb the middle east from Akrotiri if you want to, so why do we have them?” Hon. Members have articulated the argument.

Norway has been mentioned. I had the privilege of visiting the Falklands last week, with the armed forces parliamentary scheme. Our defence of the self-determination of the Falkland Islands is absolutely something of which we can all be proud. We do so much more, but who talks about that? HMS Clyde is there as a projection of naval power—I did not much enjoy being on it myself, but they do a phenomenal job—but it is not there only in defence of the Falklands. It is also there to patrol the waters near the South Sandwich Islands and South Georgia, and to defend the Antarctic treaty, fishing rights and other things that some other nations exploit—or would if we were not there.
That is a role for naval power, but who articulates that in a practical way to UK citizens so that they understand? It is not just the Government who need to wake up to that, but the whole of Parliament, and so the matter is addressed much more fully.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The hon. Gentleman rightly points out that through the continuous deployment of those ships across the globe, the Royal Navy is engaged in environmental protection. That is exactly what HMS Clyde is doing. That speaks to my son’s generation, who are passionate about the environment, ecology and looking after rare species to make sure that we leave our planet in a better state than we found it. Yet we seem unable to join that up with the importance of what looks like hard power but which, most of the time, is not, thank goodness.

Vernon Coaker: I agree. That supports my point that the use of the aircraft carriers is of course about hard power. I say to the Minister that we ought to put various scenarios to people and explain, “These are the sorts of situations where we might expect the aircraft carriers to be used when it comes to hard power.” Of course, as the hon. Lady says, there are so many other ways in which naval or military power of any sort could be used, including for the environment or to support human rights and freedoms, as we have seen so well displayed by our armed forces’ humanitarian efforts in the past few years.

In my view, however, we do not explain—or, if you like, exploit—that enough to win public support. That is the major point I wish to make. I repeat that my constituents understand why we spend money on tackling terrorism. Those who support a much broader defence profile, including the hon. Lady and others—and I count myself in this category—need to explain much more clearly to constituents why this country rightly invests in what it does and why we should perhaps invest more in our defence across the world.

The hon. Gentleman is very kind to give way again. On his point about reaching out to constituents, I visited Ellington Primary School in my constituency a couple of weeks ago. The children had read a book about landmines and their impact on communities after the war was over. They set me a challenge, as the Minister knows, to make landmines a thing of the past. That is quite a big ask for a single MP, but I hope others will assist.

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It is fascinating that the children came across that story in a book. They must have been completely transfixed by it, because it had motivated those 10-year-olds’ political activity, their desire to do something better. The challenge that the Minister and I are working on is to see if we can find a member of the Army—perhaps even the Minister himself, who is an expert in bomb disposal—to go and talk to those children about what it is to be a military person, and the skill and bravery that will help change the world into the better place that they want to see.
We are fortunate in our country to have both a world-leading manufacturing defence sector and the best armed forces in the world. Many countries around the world use our forces as a reference for how theirs should train and operate. Our defence manufacturing industries ensure that the UK remains one of the top exporters of defence equipment and technical know-how in the world. That gives global Britain a strong platform as we seek to renew and enhance our trading and defence alliances around the world. I am particularly proud of the part that my constituency has played in bringing a new national carrier strike capability into being. Aircraft and the vessels have benefited, and will benefit, from the skill and creativeness of the men and women employed in and around Filton and in the broader south-west.

I will mention a few specific areas. Rolls-Royce’s involvement in carrier strike supports several hundred jobs at its Bristol site in my constituency. The Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carrier carrier MT30 gas turbine, and the anti-air warfare Type 45 destroyer WR21 gas turbine, are supported by Bristol. It is also worth getting on the record that the anti-submarine Type 23 frigates, which are powered by Spey gas turbines, are supported out of the Filton plant, and that the STOVL derivative engines for the F35B, which will fly from the Queen Elizabeth, were designed there.

Thales, a founding member of the Aircraft Carrier Alliance, led the procurement of the glass flying control—FLYCO—position, fitted on to the rear island, which is the operational centre controlling all air operations. That links the ship’s operations room, navigation bridge, flight deck and hangar operations centre. Crucially, Thales provides the communications systems for both carriers. The systems, from wireless on board to satellite connectivity, allow personnel on the ships to talk to each other, the aircraft, the rest of the Navy and associated task groups, as well as allies, civilian vessels and air traffic, with complete security anywhere in the world.

BAE Systems has a networked visualisation suite at Filton, which allows the company to engage with the MOD and other customers in design reviews and approvals on an ongoing basis. I also pay particular tribute to the work done at MOD Abbey Wood in my constituency by more than 8,000 dedicated public servants, who will have been central to the acquisition of the ships, and the various sensors and systems on the ships and aircraft.

A national carrier strike capability is a clear outward sign of our intent to play an even bigger part on the world stage. We have heard much nonsense about Britain turning inward because of Brexit, but we have been a global maritime nation since the Elizabethan era, if not before. Our global connections might be underpinned by friendship and history, but such links are crucial and practically utilitarian. In a world where autocracies sometimes seem to have the upper hand, quiet diplomacy must always be backed by a credible capability. Our allies rightly look to us to come to their aid when they are threatened, or to act as a deterrent.

Many countries enjoy the opportunity to train with British service personnel. That helps to enhance and develop good relationships, which sustain a shared commitment to an open and inclusive world in which many might otherwise be tempted to appease or accommodate more powerful countries that do not necessarily have their best interests at heart, or share our values.

I, for one, was delighted when the Secretary of State announced the decision to deploy the Queen Elizabeth and a supporting group of escorts and auxiliaries in the far east in due course. That is a great reflection of our support for allies in the region, as well as a restatement of the freedom of navigation on the high seas, which is enjoyed by all. That is a tangible benefit that most people can understand of having carrier strike force capability. I am sure that the Minister agrees that if the carrier is going east of Suez and into the Asia-Pacific region, it would be great if it visited Singapore during the 60th anniversary of that country’s independence, which will be in 2025, to demonstrate the deep bonds between our two countries, and to emphasise our outlook being much more global.

We would do well to recall that we need to develop the carrier strike concept, and that by using F35s since the beginning, we have cross-trained with US personnel on an ongoing basis. That can only help our ability to operate and deploy with our key and closest NATO ally, the United States.

History shows us that we never seem to know where the next threat will come from. In a multi-polar world, we need to invest in capability that is agile and that will give policy and decision makers real, serious and tangible options. Carrier strike capability represents a sovereign capability, enabling our country to make choices that support our national interest. The challenges that we encountered during Operation Ellamy—the recent Libya campaign, when it was difficult for us to operate individually—demonstrated that the lack of proper carrier capability would inhibit our ability to act unilaterally in future, or even to act as well as we would like with some of our NATO allies. We now have an even greater opportunity to project the United Kingdom as a global presence, distinct from Europe, although we remain a firm European ally that will vigorously defend the continent’s freedom and security if necessary, through NATO.

The UK’s carrier strike capability will serve as a great way for our country to showcase some of the technology and innovation to which I have referred, specifically in my constituency. We need many more of the outstanding engineers and scientists who played such a central role in making the idea of new sovereign carrier strike capability a reality, so that we can enhance and increase our sovereign defence manufacturing capability well into the future. It brings together the best of British: great people, great ships, and great technical expertise and innovation.

However, we must always remember the purpose of our armed forces: to protect the national interest, our freedom and our way of life, and the security and protection of our people, using lethal force if necessary. I cannot think of a better way of doing that than with our carrier strike, and I cannot think of a better way than our carrier strike of enhancing our global position, being ambassadors to the world and tying together, as others have said, the three Departments of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department for International Development and the Ministry of Defence. That is something that we need to talk about a lot more.
3.45 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I commend the hon. Member for Witney, Robert Courts, on an impassioned opening speech. I also associate myself fully with the words of the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed about my colleague on the Defence Committee, the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North, Ruth Smeeth, because what she and many of her colleagues face is an affront to parliamentary democracy. They should have the full support of the entire House.

I agree with a lot of what has been said in the debate. We on the Defence Committee often find that we agree on quite a lot—apart from one glaring, obvious thing. The hon. Member for Glasgow North East, Mr Sweeney, pointed out some of the issues faced in Govan to do with the structure of the yard, which was formerly Norwegian owned and was built specifically for oil rigs. That legacy has impacted the shipping industry across the whole of these islands; I will go into that at some point, as the son of a shipyard worker outside the city of Glasgow. I also agreed with the hon. Gentleman about incremental changes to structures. That links to affordability and capability. Capability is worth nothing if we cannot afford it in the long term.

The right hon. Member for New Forest East, the Chair of the Defence Committee, eloquently addressed the political dimensions. He might say more about that. His chairmanship of the Select Committee is second to none, and he is welcoming to all Members, no matter if we have slight disagreements on the odd occasion. The hon. Member for Gedling, Vernon Coaker, talked about support. I could not agree more with him. Another element of that support, apart from the construction of vessels of any type, is the naval personnel. I am sure that he recognises, as Committee members do, some of the profound challenges we face in recruitment, not just to the Army but to the entire armed forces. The hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke, Jack Lopresti, mentioned the connection between local industry and the industrial complex. He will find no disagreement here. He is correct that those are essential elements to consider.

A few anniversaries were mentioned at the beginning of speeches; it would be remiss of me as a Bankie not to mention that today is the anniversary of the launching of the Duke of York from the John Brown shipbuilding company, the greatest shipyard that ever existed on the Clyde, in the burgh of Clydebank, West Dunbartonshire. My grandfather worked as a riveter in the yard. The shipyard also gave birth to the mighty Hood and to aircraft carriers, the Nairana class—a strike force of vessels of any type, is the naval personnel. I am sure that he recognises, as Committee members do, some of the profound challenges we face in recruitment, not just to the Army but to the entire armed forces. The hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke, Jack Lopresti, mentioned the connection between local industry and the industrial complex. He will find no disagreement here. He is correct that those are essential elements to consider.

Mr Sweeney: The hon. Gentleman is making a very good speech about Clydebank’s shipbuilding pedigree. He might also want to note, for the record, that the world’s first aircraft carrier, HMS Argus—a converted ocean liner—was built just downstream at Beardmore’s in Dalmuir. That gave birth to the whole concept of the modern through-deck aircraft carrier, and it is a great tribute to the pedigree of Clyde shipbuilding. I would perhaps dispute his claim that Clydebank is the greatest shipyard on the Clyde, but Fairfield has a good claim to that title, too.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: No Glaswegian is ever going to win that argument with me. On Beardmore’s, the hon. Gentleman steals my thunder and my speech—perhaps he saw it earlier. Beardmore’s was one of the greatest shipyards. It ran from Dalmuir, where I am from, all the way into the borough itself. Its demise was the result of bad planning and ineffectual ministerial planning of the budget between the two great wars—but enough of the history. Well, perhaps I will mention one more thing. As the son of an 85-year-old coppersmith who still has his equipment in the garden hut, I fundamentally recognise the blood, sweat and tears of those who build the carrier force, even in the 21st century. They are to be commended for their sterling work, which they are committed to in Rosyth.

I am sure the Minister recognises that there are three members of the Defence Committee here. The role of the carrier force is well understood, not just by the Committee but in the House, and I hope he recognises some of the concerns that have been highlighted to us as the carriers head into service. A former Chief of the Defence Staff said of the carriers:

“The navy says that in a ‘high-threat environment’ they will be protected by two destroyers, two anti-submarine frigates, a submarine, a tanker and a supply ship. That is a huge commitment for a navy that has just 19 destroyers and frigates and six available subs.”

I hope the Minister takes that on board and considers how we will rectify a situation in which we think we are unable to deliver that for two carriers. In addition, Professor Peter Roberts of the Royal United Services Institute stated:

“it’s clear that the decision to pursue two carriers at the expense of everything else in defence has weakened the defence posture of the UK as a whole.”

How do we reconcile that with the contribution of those two carriers to the UK’s defence?

Following on from what the Chair of the Select Committee and the hon. Member for Gedling said, the Minister may want to address the impact on post-Brexit trade talks with the People’s Republic of China. The Secretary of State’s first foray—I suppose in some technical manner—into the carrier strike strategy with his recent statement about using “lethal force” in the South China sea? Indeed, the Chancellor said that the UK’s relationship with China “has not been made simpler” by that. Can the Minister tell us whether that first foray was a success?

The hon. Member for Witney correctly mentioned some of the Government decisions made. Since 1997, we have seen an overall decrease of around 39% in the number of ships in the Royal Navy, with a 46% decrease in the number of destroyers and frigates.

The Chair of the Select Committee and I fundamentally agree about the north Atlantic. I think some of our colleagues are getting a bit shy of me banging the drum about the north Atlantic, but I think he appreciates it. There is growing concern that, given the Russian Federation’s refresh of the bastion theory, we must
Hindered by short-term political planning. Will the Minister advise us how the strategy will enhance capability in the north Atlantic and the High North?

On capability, the Select Committee has consistently raised concerns about issues with the F-35 programme and the impact of expenditure, including about our ability to deliver on the expected expenditure in the equipment plan, given that the Public Accounts Committee stated in January that the Department “lacks the capability to accurately cost programmes within its Equipment Plan”.

I recognise what other Members said about the F-35s from the United States. That is a great commitment by the United States, but there are concerns about our ability to follow up on it.

On foreign policy, the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed reminded us that we are an island. It is a pity that that was missed out of the 2015 strategic defence and security review. The Secretary of State, although he was not in that role at the time, was questioned about that by the Select Committee and said he would ensure that it was corrected. The hon. Lady mentioned the battle for the north Atlantic, which is a stark reminder of the strategic importance of the north Atlantic. As I keep saying, it is in the name—NATO is the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. The Chair of the Select Committee mentioned the issues with the Prince of Wales, which perhaps should have been called the Duke of Rothesay. If it is sold, will that money be spent on a fleet for the north Atlantic and the High North?

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Essential elements of this discussion are sometimes hindered by short-term political planning. Will the Minister advise us on whether there have been any discussions in the Department about approaching our Scandinavian allies? I have raised that in the Select Committee. From my party’s perspective, adopting the Scandinavian model of having SDSRs that cover whole Parliaments would be an appropriate way to approach the planning of defence policy. Although there may not be consensus across the House on one or two elements of defence, I think we could coalesce around the vast majority of defence issues and gain support for them for a whole five-year Parliament. That would give consistency to those working in the field in industry, to the Department, and, essentially, to those in the armed forces who we ask to go on to the frontline. Finally, will the Minister commit to Rosyth being the long-term refitting home of the carrier force?

3.57 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I congratulate the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on securing the debate and allowing us an opportunity to consider this very important capability. May I also take the opportunity to express my agreement with the hon. Members for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) and for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), and to express my absolute solidarity and support for my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) and other colleagues?

In his passionate speech, the hon. Member for Witney summarised the role of aircraft carriers in the Royal Navy’s recent history and called for a national carrier strategy and innovation as we look to the future. We also heard from a range of other Members, who spoke with passion about our armed forces, highlighting the support across the House for those who serve Queen and country and for the platforms they work from.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North mentioned the exquisite ships she visited and made the point that we need the crews to staff them. I will return to that. She also mentioned the need to secure employment opportunities across the UK, the need for a long-term plan and the need to consider the steady drumbeat of orders. I hope the Minister responds to that point.

The hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed gave an overview of our maritime tradition and of the new carriers and their capabilities, and spoke of her pride in watching them develop. She also mentioned the need for a clear strategy for carriers into the future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) mentioned his very interesting personal experience in the shipbuilding industry, and the complexities and constraints of the shipyards. He also talked about the need to secure employment weighted in the support and supply chain across the UK, which is a key point to bear in mind as we move forward.

The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Mr Lewis), who is Chair of the Select Committee on Defence, gave a plea for new members of that Committee and raised his concerns about the 1998 SDSR, which was unfunded, and the 2010 SDSR, which was unstrategic. He raised the need to have a strategic goal and long-term investment in our armed forces, a point that he has raised persistently and will continue to raise in the future, I am sure.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) talked about his sense of frustration, as well as the need for foreign policy that is linked to defence policy and for better co-ordination. He raised the growing need to engage with the British public better, to win hearts and minds, which is something that was raised a number of times.

The hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) highlighted the point that many businesses in the supply chain in his constituency, and across the UK, have contributed to the carrier capability.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) highlighted, in order to have an effective carrier strike capability, there has to be the necessary personnel. This is the first defence debate since the publication of the latest personnel statistics, which showed yet another fall in the number of Royal Navy and Royal Marines personnel. Can I ask the Minister for his response to those statistics? In 2010 the total trained strength of the Navy and the marines was 35,500, but that has now fallen to just 29,100. That is almost 5% short of the Government’s own target of 30,450 for 2020. Can the Minister confirm whether the 2020 targets for all services, but particularly for the Navy and the marines, still stand and how he hopes to achieve them?
Rear-Admiral Jerry Kyd, the first commanding officer of HMS Queen Elizabeth, who is to soon be promoted to vice-admiral and fleet commander—I extend my congratulations to him—has described recruitment to the Royal Navy as a “constant battle”. Based on the latest statistics, it is a battle that the Government are losing. The announcement by the Secretary of State of two new littoral strike ships will no doubt put further pressure on an already overstretched Navy. Can the Minister confirm what efforts are being undertaken to buck those recruitment trends and to ensure that our carriers, our Navy and all our services have the necessary personnel to meet their objectives, namely to defend our country, its values and interests?

The F-35B fighter aircraft will be an essential part of the carrier strike. However, recent reports suggest that a full F-35 carrier strike capability will only be delivered by 2025-26, some four years after the expected first deployment of HMS Queen Elizabeth. As my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling mentioned, can the Minister confirm that the Government remain committed to procuring all 138 F-35B fighter aircraft?

The Government’s national security adviser, Sir Mark Sedwill, has previously said that the aircraft carriers would “inevitably be used in the context of allied operations of some kind if used in a contested environment”.

The hon. Member for Witney made this point. Can the Minister set out how he will work to ensure interoperability with our allies, as the carrier strike capability develops?

Finally, there is the issue of affordability. The National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee have repeatedly warned Ministers of huge funding gaps in their defence equipment plan, of between £7 billion and £15 billion. At the same time, the Secretary of State has already proposed sending our carriers to the Pacific and has even talked about building military bases in the Caribbean and south-east Asia, among many other commitments. Ministers can no longer delay making decisions on those important issues, so will the Minister agree to the recommendations of the Public Accounts Committee and come forward with “a coherent plan to maintain the UK-based capability to develop and deliver the equipment required in the future” by July of this year? I look forward to the Minister’s response.

4.4 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on securing this important and timely debate. It has been a good-natured and collegial debate. We can certainly agree on two things: we are all delighted that the age of carrier strike has returned and that the Treasury is the enemy.

A number of colleagues have made thoughtful and intelligent contributions. It has been one of the best debates I have been in as a Minister for some time, which is why I stand in slight trepidation as I make my own contribution. There have been a number of detailed questions. I will do my best to answer them, but I have no doubt that I will not be able to answer all of them, in which case I will write in detail to hon. Members. Many of the subjects that have come out during the debate are worthy of debates in their own right, be that recruiting or the national shipbuilding strategy. I cannot begin to do those subjects justice, but hopefully I will touch some wave tops—no pun intended—as I respond.

We are a proud maritime nation, dependent upon global access to the sea to build our prosperity and project our influence. For centuries, the Royal Navy has been a vital instrument of sea power, ensuring our unrestricted access to trade routes and protecting our vital interests around the globe. Over the past 100 years, the aircraft carrier has increasingly come to epitomise the strength and ambition of leading naval powers. It is a statement of intent and a manifest example that a state is a player on the global stage, which is able to reach out and exploit the attributes of maritime manoeuvre, organic sustainability, and the speed and flexibility of air power to coerce or reassure. As such, the rebuilding of a world-class carrier strike capability offers a step change in our ability to globally project military power and constitutes a new strategic conventional deterrence.

The United Kingdom’s carrier strike capability has three component parts. The first two are the state-of-the-art Queen Elizabeth aircraft carriers and the cutting-edge fifth generation F-35B Lightning combat aircraft, which the aircraft carriers have been specifically designed and built from the hull up to operate and accommodate, as highlighted by several hon. Members. The third element is the Crowsnest airborne early-warning and control system, which will provide the eyes and ears of the carrier strike task group, and enable command and control to the Lightning aircraft.

Where are we on this journey? Last year we saw HMS Queen Elizabeth complete successful first of class flying trials off the east coast of the United States, which followed the declaration of initial operating capabilities in secondary roles earlier in the year. I will come back to the questions about that raised by hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) in a moment. HMS Queen Elizabeth is now in Portsmouth undergoing a capability insertion period prior to deploying to the east coast to conduct an operational test, which will be the first time we will operate frontline F-35Bs with the ship.

Meanwhile, HMS Prince of Wales is on track to be accepted by the Royal Navy at the end of the year. Last summer we saw 617 Squadron stand up in the UK with the Lightning force, subsequently declaring initial operating capability from land in December. They are now developing their understanding of operating the aircraft prior to deploying with the ship to the east coast. Crowsnest is working to a challenging timeline to marry up the other two components to enable declaration of initial operating capability for carrier strike in December 2020, prior to the inaugural operational deployment in 2021, which will be the start of a 50-year life.

The formidable F-35B Lightning will be at the centre of this. Jointly manned by the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy, it will be able to conduct strategic attacks, support our troops and be able to work in threat environments hitherto unimagined by previous commanders. This is timely given the sophistication and proliferation of air defence systems in recent years, but the Lightning can do more and possesses an impressive ability to collect intelligence on enemy formations and threat systems. Just as importantly, it is then able to relay that information to other friendly forces working
within and around the carrier strike task group, providing unparalleled situational awareness and so contribute to information superiority.

On the questions specifically regarding the F-35, as hon. Members know, to date 17 jets have been delivered and we have approvals to purchase the first 48, of which we have formally ordered 35. Ultimately, we are committed to buying As. That is not a decision we have to make right now, and in many ways it would be wrong to make it right now. That is especially so with our closest ally, the United States, which will be embarking United States marine corps jets on our platform. We have an eye to these attributes, together with other forms of attack from the task group, such as long-range Tomahawk cruise missiles, constitute a powerful ability to reach inland— all this in a mobile force able to range 500 miles a day and at immediate readiness, without the need to seek the permission of other nations for the land-basing of our fighter aircraft. Once our Queen Elizabeth-class carriers, including HMS Prince of Wales when accepted at the end of the year, become fully operational—we have already highlighted that timeframe—the United Kingdom will maintain a carrier ready to deploy at very high readiness, that is, within five days.

That goes back to the question that the hon. Member for Gedling asked about how the two carriers will work together. Like any platform, the physical side of the ship will go through a natural cycle. Having been built—or, in future, having been through a long period of maintenance—it will enter the force generation period, when manpower and jets are married with the ship. We will go through a training period. We always think about the platforms, but we do not always think about the people. They will go through their careers; new pilots and junior sailors come in, and we must ensure that they are trained in the appropriate way. Then the ship goes on deployment. When it comes back, it goes into a period of maintenance—and the cycle continues.

The point of having two ships and effectively offsetting that process is that at any one point we will always have one at very high readiness. There may be times when we potentially have two carriers available; they would not both be at very high readiness, but a second carrier could, for example, go off and do a secondary task. As we said in the SDSR, who knows what is around the corner? Who predicted Hurricane Irma in the Caribbean last year? We were able to send a vessel to deal with that situation. By having two vessels—especially new vessels—and offsetting that cycle, we can maintain the flexibility to ensure we have those vessels available to do a number of different tasks.

While delivery of carrier strike is absolutely main effort—the primary role—the inherent flexibility of the carrier enables a range of secondary roles to be undertaken, if that is what the situation dictates, as I have just tried to describe. Those roles range from supporting our Royal Marines in undertaking amphibious operations, to providing discrete support to our special forces and, as we saw, humanitarian and disaster relief.

The new capability will enable the UK to make an unparalleled European contribution to NATO, the cornerstone of our defence policy. Indeed, carrier strike is “international by design”, with the convening power of the Queen Elizabeth-class carriers already evident. Other European nations have already expressed a clear interest in exercising with, and more importantly deploying as part of, the carrier strike task group. Thus, carrier strike provides not only a potent additional capability to NATO, but also a means of coalescing European naval effort. It will, of course, also be able to operate with our partners’ aircraft, a point that my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) made.

That is especially so with our closest ally, the United States, which will be embarking United States marine corps F-35B Lightning jets alongside our own on board HMS Queen Elizabeth for her inaugural operational deployment in 2021. That level of close co-operation has been reached through extensive work over the past decade between our two nations, requiring levels of information sharing and trust that are only evident between the closest of allies.

My hon. Friend the Member for Witney talked in his opening comments, which were excellent—I have not heard a better opening to a debate for some time—about a “loss of culture” of carrier strike. I will gently say that that was anticipated, which is why over the past 10 years we have had many Royal Naval personnel and pilots operating on US carriers, so that we have not completely lost that skill set. Personally, I was delighted and honoured to go on board the George H.W. Bush the summer before last, when it was operating in the North sea.

Robert Courts: I am grateful to the Minister for clarifying that. To clarify what I meant, I did not intend any criticism from 2010 onwards; I fully appreciate that
we have had people embedded with the US navy. I meant operating big carriers, as opposed to the smaller carriers we have had since the Invincible days, and the change in culture from the late 1970s, when we had the Audacious class.

**Mark Lancaster:** I think my comments demonstrate that we are well placed to renew this capability in the Royal Navy and, crucially, how well placed we are—a point made by several hon. Members—to ensure that we have interoperability with our closest allies.

Carrier strike not only offers political and military advantage to Her Majesty’s Government and our allies, but provides significant benefit to the UK industry. Before I get on to the industry element, I will touch on strategy, because the point was raised by several hon. Members. I gave one example to the hon. Member for Gedling of how the Government are genuinely trying to bring a cross-Whitehall approach to formulating strategies in this area. That is something we have already been doing with carrier; as I have already said, the past five years have been getting us to this point. We now have a cross-Whitehall strategy being formed about how exactly we should use this asset.

Of course, that all cascades down from the formation of the National Security Council in 2010, which brought together for the first time the different strands of Government to try to make the very decisions that hon. Members have rightly said we should be considering. The framework is in place and, of course, as we move forward through operations and gain experience, it will be refined.

With regard to industry, the Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carriers have been built over six locations, involving over 10,000 people, in addition to 800 apprentices and 700 businesses and suppliers. This includes 7,000 to 8,000 jobs at the tier 1 shipyards around the UK, plus a further 2,000 to 3,000 people across the UK supply chain. UK industry also provides approximately 15% by value of each of the 3,000 Lightning aircraft scheduled to be built over the life of the programme. That will potentially create a £35 billion net contribution to the UK economy and up to 25,000 jobs in the UK.

In addition, the UK’s role as a key partner in the global F-35 programme was reaffirmed earlier this month, with the announcement of a major boost to the F-35 avionic and aircraft component repair hub, which was awarded a second major assignment of work, worth some £500 million, by the US Department of Defence. This is an excellent outcome and will support hundreds of additional F-35 jobs in the UK, many of them at the MOD’s Defence and Electronics Components Agency at MOD Sealand in North Wales, where the majority of the work will be carried out. It will involve crucial maintenance, repair, overhaul and upgrade services for an even wider range of F-35 avionic, electronic and electrical systems for hundreds of F-35 aircraft based globally.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) talked at length and with great, detailed knowledge about the impact and the tempo, if you like, of not losing skillsets, and about the relationship between Government and industry. I accept that he does not support many of the recommendations of the national shipbuilding strategy. Owing to the scope of the debate, I will not get into the procurement of fleet solid support ships, or that relationship. However, as he probably spotted in February, Sir John Parker announced that he will undertake a review of that strategy, which is due to report later this year. I hope that that demonstrates to the hon. Gentleman that, while I support the strategy, we are not dogmatic in our approach to it, and that we are prepared to review the strategy one year on to see how it is bedding in. He made some important points.

**Dr Julian Lewis:** On fleet solid support ships, we on the Defence Committee are a little bit worried that it is being presented to us and to the country that the Government have no choice but to run a competition. However, other countries, such as France, have built such ships without running competitions, and have classified them as warships. We worry about what, for example, Rosyth dockyard will do between the completion of the Prince of Wales and the first refit of the Queen Elizabeth. Building such ships would be a perfect way of maintaining that capability. We hope these wider considerations are being taken into account.

**Mark Lancaster:** Indeed; that is a perfectly reasonable point. My right hon. Friend wrote to the Minister with responsibility for defence procurement, my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), with many of these questions on 26 February. Hopefully he now has a reply, because the Minister replied yesterday.

**Dr Lewis:** I have not seen it yet.

**Mark Lancaster:** In that case, without going through the letter, I assure my right hon. Friend that it answers his questions, so far as I am concerned.

My hon. Friend the Member for Witney made several interesting points, not least in highlighting the historical necessity of carriers and— to my mind, as a Defence Minister— about historical SDSRs, with some being strategic and some effectively being written to budget. Rarely do those two factors meet. Getting that right in the future is absolutely key.

**Robert Courts:** I will canter through some of the points that struck me in the debate, which I thoroughly enjoyed, and from which I have learned a great deal. It really was an example of our all coming together with various kinds of expertise and being able to make progress in an area. I am grateful to all hon. Members for that.

**4.24 pm**
I entirely associate myself with the comments of others about the fortitude of the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth). Never mind the aircraft; I very much look forward to the carriers being stocked with crockery from her constituency, off which the men and women sailing on the aircraft carrier will eat. I thank her for her contribution. My hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) made many excellent points, including on the battleground of the great sea war. Nothing much has changed regarding the importance of the sea. She was quite right to draw attention to the Aircraft Carrier Alliance, a particularly successful, innovative endeavour.

I really enjoyed the detailed knowledge that the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) brought to the debate, and two of his points in particular: first, the point that a carrier covers the equivalent of 0.3% of an airfield—I have never thought about it in quite that way before, but he is absolutely right—and secondly, his point about the industrial legacy of the space shuttle. Again, I have never thought about a carrier in that way, but he is quite right that we must make use of carriers in the way the Americans did with the space shuttle.

I feel terribly impertinent saying anything about defence in any room in which my right hon. Friend for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) stands, because of his expertise. He is absolutely right about the predictability of unpredictability, and I loved his point that the Treasury has sunk more ships than our enemies ever have. I could not agree more with the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) on linking foreign policy with defence, and on engaging with the UK public—something that I hope we have started to do today, at least in a small way. My hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) made a similar point on the need for links between DFID, the FCO and the MOD, and I entirely agree with him on that.

I thank both Opposition Front-Bench spokespeople, the hon. Members for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) and for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones), for their contributions. Both seemed a bit startled by the extent to which we all agreed in the debate. It happens occasionally, and maybe we should all celebrate it when it does.

I thank the Minister for all his detailed answers. My final request to him, which I think every Member here made, in different ways, is for an overarching carrier strategy that brings together all Departments and everything we have discussed in one document that we can then debate and take forward. That is the central ask of the debate. I look forward to working with him and with every colleague in doing battle with, if not foreign countries, at least the Treasury.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved.
That this House has considered carrier strike strategy and its contribution to UK defence.

4.27 pm
Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Monday 4 March 2019

[SIR DAVID CRUSBY in the Chair]

School Funding

4.30 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered e-petition 232220 relating to school funding.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I present the petition on behalf of Mr Andrew Ramanandi, the headteacher of St Joseph’s Catholic Primary School, Blaydon, and more than 104,000 teachers, support staff, heads, parents and governors around the country who have signed it. I acknowledge the fair funding for schools campaign, which was started by Mr Ramanandi and joined by all headteachers across the borough of Gateshead. Their imaginative campaign has captured the attention of the public and many politicians, and they will be listening closely to the debate.

Mr Ramanandi is in the Gallery.

Dedicated staff, who are by far the most important resource in our schools, face an uphill battle due to not only school funding, but curriculum reform, an increasing workload and the growing and often complex needs of many of our children. Time and again, we hear that workload and the growing and often complex needs of our children. Time and again, we hear that morale and staff retention are low. Our educators are helping them to respond to that challenge.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend and fellow Petitions Committee member on securing and introducing this important debate. In January, the Minister encouraged MPs to write to their local schools and congratulate them on their improvements in key stage 2. I did just that, but I heard back almost immediately from my local schools, which had improved their results significantly, that they were having to lose the key staff who had helped them to do that. Does she agree that that is completely counterproductive and hugely concerning for the future performance of those schools?

Liz Twist: I agree with my hon. Friend. Friend that it runs counter to what we might expect to congratulate schools and then find that they have huge financial problems.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Does the hon. Lady acknowledge, however, that there is still a huge difference between the funding for schools in rural shire counties such as mine and that of schools in metropolitan inner-city areas?

Liz Twist: The petitioners are keen to look at the overall situation with regards to school funding, rather than asking, “Is this one right? Is that one right?” The question is whether we have sufficient funding to provide a good education for our children.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Before the hon. Lady moves on, can she give us an idea of the percentage increase that she thinks would now be sufficient?

Liz Twist: I do not have a percentage figure, but it has been estimated that more than £2.8 billion would be needed to restore the situation to where it was in 2013.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Liz Twist: I will make some progress, but I will take some interventions shortly.

The campaign started with a letter co-signed by headteachers of primary, secondary and special educational needs and disability schools in Gateshead, who became increasingly alarmed by the impact that a real-terms reduction in school funding was having on the children and young people in their care. The letter, which was sent to parents before Christmas, informed them that schools may no longer be able to provide the same level of service and asked them for their support in raising the schools’ concerns with the Government.

This is a speech of two parts. The first part is about the facts and figures that we regularly bandy around the Chamber and in official papers. Eventually, they get down to the school heads and governors at the kind of scale where they can see the black holes in their budgets and try to work out how they can balance their books.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Coventry has experienced the same sort of difficulties as my hon. Friend’s constituency. I did a survey and visited several schools last year, which showed that out of 103 schools, 102 were suffering from teacher shortages, demoralisation, rising class numbers or low pay. Does she agree that the Government have to do something about that?

Liz Twist: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Liz Twist: I will make some progress, so that the debate makes some sense.

As I said, this is a speech of two parts. The first part is about the facts and figures and the second part is about what they mean for our schools—the staff, the governors, the parents and, most of all, the pupils.

Sir Hugo Swire: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise those inequalities, but does she concede that this Government have tried to do something about fairer funding? In our part of the world, in Devon, there has been an increase, but we are still chronically underfunded. Every child in a Devon school gets £304 less than the national average, so we lose out on £27 million per year.

Under a previous Labour Government, funding was skewed towards the inner cities and away from the shire counties.

Liz Twist: As I have said, the debate is about having enough funding for all schools to provide the education that children deserve.
[Liz Twist]

The second part of my speech is about what the figures mean for our schools. At the start of the debate, we should establish the facts about school funding. It is right that more money has been allocated to education, following pressure from hon. Members on both sides of the House who know the pressures that their local schools face. It is also right to acknowledge that the Government have offered additional funds to support increasing pension costs, which have hit schools badly. The Minister must know, however, as I do, that those measures do not go anywhere near far enough to meet the real-terms cuts that schools face year on year. The statistics from the School Cuts campaign, which were verified by the chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir David Norgrove, show that 91% of schools across England have experienced real-terms cuts in per-pupil funding since 2015.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): One of my primary school headteachers, who has been a teacher for 30 years and a headteacher for 15 years, tells me: “I’ve never experienced a time when the range of needs has been so complex and the financial support so thin.” She is the head of a school in one of the most deprived parts of my constituency and faces an overall deficit of £70,000 this year. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is not adequate to enable her to do the job that she has been doing for so long?

Liz Twist: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend’s assessment of the situation. That is a real problem, as it is for Mr Ramanandi and schools in Gateshead.

As I was saying, the Minister must know that schools face real-terms cuts year on year. It is simply not right to say that funding per pupil, which is the measure that really matters, has gone up. The Government’s statistics show that England’s schools have 137,000 more pupils in the system. The respected Institute for Fiscal Studies acknowledges that schools have suffered an 8% real-terms reduction in spending per pupil, despite growing numbers of pupils coming through the door.

With increasing numbers of pupils, and decreasing funding in real terms, schools have had to make cuts that have resulted in 5,400 fewer teachers, 2,800 fewer teaching assistants, 1,400 fewer support staff and 1,200 fewer auxiliary staff. If funding per pupil had been maintained in value since 2015, school funding in England would be £5.1 billion higher than it is now.

Like the petitioners, school leaders across England are concerned that the Government have not kept their promise to increase school funding in cash terms this year. The Secretary of State for Education promised that “all schools would see a modest rise in funding”. However, 4,819 schools have not received the Education Secretary’s guaranteed cash increase, meaning that one in four primary schools and one in six secondary schools have had their funding cut in cash terms this year. Locally, 71 schools in Gateshead have suffered Government cuts to per-pupil funding since 2015, losing out on £14 million. In my constituency, the average cut is about £45,000 per primary school and £185,000 per secondary school.

Headteachers in my constituency tell me that, as funding has become tighter, schools have had to cut back on essential resources: teaching and non-teaching staff; support staff who work with vulnerable pupils; small group work; interventions with children who are not thriving; teaching resources; subject choices; classroom and extracurricular activities; repairs for buildings, including asbestos management; and renewal of equipment.

Unison, which represents support staff in many of our schools, forecast that over the next year one in four schools across Gateshead borough will see redundancies. We know that, on top of that, many schools are not replacing staff who leave, so the reality is much worse for them.

Support staff are disproportionately affected by the redundancies. These are mostly part-time or term-time-only jobs, low-paid and generally taken by women living close to the school. By 2021, all but three schools in Gateshead are expected to be in budget deficit, so it is likely that further redundancies are on the horizon. How do we expect our schools to plan for the future?

Steve Double: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady and fellow member of the Petitions Committee for giving way, and she is making an excellent start and making the case for more funding for schools. I am sure that there is no one in this Chamber today who does not want to see more funding for schools. However, schools in Cornwall have been making the sorts of rationalisations and working efficiently in the way that she is describing for many years. So while we make the case for more funding for our schools, does she agree that the allocation of that funding must be fairly distributed across the country, because metropolitan schools have had too big a share of the cake for far too long?

Liz Twist: I will repeat the point a third time that the petitioners have been clear with me that their concern is that all schools are properly funded, wherever they are, so I will not enter into those discussions.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): My hon. Friend will share my concern about children in areas of high deprivation. They are already well behind the curve in terms of development; they were disadvantaged the day they were born. The education system can actually drag them out of poverty, but does she agree that this Government policy ensures that they are left in poverty?

Liz Twist: Yes, clearly the lack of resources in schools and the loss of jobs mean that attention cannot be given to important issues, which is a real detriment to the people affected.

The second part of my speech is about what these figures mean for our schools: for the staff, the governors, the parents, but most of all, for the pupils in each and every school. I am sure that other Members will indulge me if I talk about the schools in my constituency; I have no doubt that many of them will wish to share experiences from their own schools.

Last Friday, I visited Portobello Primary School in Birtley. During my visit, the headteacher and governors of this great community school told me about their concerns about funding pressures. In the last year, they have lost four valuable members of staff to redundancy:
a higher level teaching assistant with 20 years’ experience in early years education; an experienced teacher who led on the arts curriculum; a highly skilled teaching assistant who was trained in supporting children with medical and educational needs; and a dedicated school counsellor, who supported young children with their mental health.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that for children with special needs, such as those in Coleridge Primary School in my constituency, this situation is a double whammy?

Liz Twist: Yes, I most certainly agree with my hon. Friend on that point.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Ind): We all recognise that supporting the higher needs budget is extraordinarily important because of the vulnerable children that it supports. However, does the hon. Lady agree that when there is just a compulsory virement away from other budgets, that exacerbates the problem and that what we need is higher needs properly funded as a bloc?

Liz Twist: Yes, I most certainly agree with the hon. Lady.

The headteacher and governors at Portobello Primary School also said that the impact of real-terms budget reductions has made it harder to deliver specific interventions with pupils; that it is increasingly difficult to provide personal and emotional support for vulnerable pupils; that they have lost decades’ worth of experience and curriculum knowledge; and that they are finding it harder and harder to take children on educational visits and purchase up-to-date teaching resources and equipment.

Due to these redundancies, staff are taking on extra duties and the local community are supporting the school by fundraising. I applaud the commitment of the staff of Portobello, who are doing everything they can for the children in their care. Most headteachers in my constituency could tell a similar story; it simply is not good enough that schools are not adequately funded to provide an outstanding education.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way.

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): Order. May I ask Members on the Benches at the sides to come forward to speak, so that the microphones can pick them up?

Seema Malhotra: Thank you, Sir David. My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech. Given the feedback that I have received from schools in Hounslow, in my own constituency and in that of my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), I know that the pressures and demands, particularly regarding the special educational needs of the most vulnerable, could now become the next national issue, just as adult social care has been in crisis because of the lack of places. In my constituency and the rest of Hounslow, although we could provide over 1,200 places with the extra investment and funding that has come, there are more than 2,000 children with educational and healthcare plans. Does she agree that is a concern?

Liz Twist: Thank you, Sir David. My hon. Friend was making a very powerful speech. Given the feedback that I have received from schools in Hounslow, in my own constituency and in that of my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), I know that the pressures and demands, particularly regarding the special educational needs of the most vulnerable, could now become the next national issue, just as adult social care has been in crisis because of the lack of places. In my constituency and the rest of Hounslow, although we could provide over 1,200 places with the extra investment and funding that has come, there are more than 2,000 children with educational and healthcare plans. Does she agree that is a concern?

Liz Twist: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention and I most certainly agree that there is a need to put additional resources into special educational needs as well.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I want to put it on the record that the Backbench Business Committee asked on 5 February for a six-hour debate on this issue, and that request has been granted. That request was supported by 43 Members, many of whom are here today. It is about time that the Government found time for this very valuable debate, because it is roundly supported.

Liz Twist: I thank the hon. Lady very much for that intervention. What is clear from all Members here today is that we need a long debate on this issue, and I hope that we will have one soon.

Last November, I visited St Joseph’s Catholic Primary School in Blaydon, along with our local parliamentary outreach worker, Gillian. It is the school of Mr Ramanandi, the lead petitioner—and a fine school it is, too. I met some of the younger pupils there: they were polite and well-behaved, but also fizzes to make inquiries and ask questions. They were not afraid to ask some of the questions that many adult constituents would be too polite to ask.

Our discussions ranged far and wide, really covering some important local, national and environmental issues. These children had clearly been taught to have inquiring minds and to express themselves—in fact, I had to leave the school without answering all of their questions as I was late for my next meeting. In December, I had the chance to see the school Christmas play in a church just down the road from my office, and what talented and well-behaved ambassadors for their school the children were! I congratulate Mr Ramanandi and the staff on that.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): My hon. Friend speaks with great experience on these matters. She reminds me of my own experience at East Acton Primary School, which I visited on Friday. In London, there are not just redundancies; there are also retention issues, because of the prohibitive cost of housing in London. As a result, there is a very imbalanced age structure of the teaching staff. They can get newly qualified teachers up to the age of 30, but then they are off somewhere else, because they want to put down roots. Does she agree that that is a tragic state of affairs?

Also, I spoke to one teacher who qualified in 1998. Our taxpayers have funded her training, but such older professionals are now brain-draining away. The teacher I met is moving to Beijing, because she cannot live on the wages here. Is that not a tragedy, too?

Liz Twist: It is indeed a tragedy to see such a waste of the skilled people who are teaching in schools. It is a loss to our schools.

The point of my telling Members about St Joseph’s is to impress on them that the school, like Portobello and many other primary schools in my constituency, has great, dedicated staff who put all their effort into giving the children the best education they can have. When Mr Ramanandi and other heads tell me that their funding is not enough to maintain the high, rounded
standards of teaching, learning and support their pupils need, I ask questions of them, but I believe and support them.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Liz Twist: I will carry on a little.

Of course, it is not just primary schools that are feeling the strain; our secondary schools face real funding problems. Steve Haigh, head of Whickham School, says:

“The more pressure on my budget, the more class sizes have had to increase. We started a national petition to tell the Government that these cuts can’t go on, because children in Gateshead and across England deserve better. Headteachers are facing impossible choices. They care deeply about the whole of their communities—children, parents and staff. When choices are made to cut deeply in areas of need, making staff redundant and cutting the support for vulnerable young people, hard won gains are at risk, and effort and sacrifices made over the last decade may be thrown away if schools are not adequately funded. I stand proud with my community for our successes and I feel every cut I have to make—well concealed, painfully made, shamefully felt.”

I agree with Mr Haigh, who does excellent work in our local secondary school, especially in supporting pupils’ mental health.

Let us not forget the impact on children with special educational needs, who are also losing out because of the pressure on school budgets. Joanne, a parent, wrote to me:

“I am writing to express my serious concerns about school funding. I have an 11-year-old son and a 9-year-old girl in primary school. A regular topic of conversation in our house is how disgusting the school toilets are. It’s not that they are not cleaned; they are so old and dilapidated they are beyond looking nice. There is no spare money to replace them, nor has there been for many years. My son has autism, and during his whole school life he has never received the one-to-one support to which he has always been entitled, due to funding. My daughter regularly runs straight to the loo after school, after holding it in all day rather than use the toilets. I cannot fault the school, they try their very best at all times. Isn’t it the job of Parliament to do better for our children, our next generation?”

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): One school in my constituency is looking at more than £1 million of cuts by 2020-21. That will mean that it will not be able to afford any learning support assistants, teaching assistants, office staff or site staff. As children with special needs need one-to-one support from learning assistants, does my hon. Friend agree that school cuts will disproportionately affect them?

Liz Twist: Yes, I most certainly agree with my hon. Friend.

Janet Daby: I thank my hon. Friend for making such a powerful speech. Does she agree that the education system is on the brink of insolvency, and that it is unacceptable for parents to be asked for money, for professional fundraisers to be employed and for charges to be introduced for parents, to provide basic provisions in schools?

Liz Twist: Yes, I believe very strongly, as do the petitioners, that our schools should be properly funded to provide the education their pupils need. Where fundraising is concerned, it is people in areas of deprivation who may well lose out, because there is no spare cash.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): Bringing food into schools to feed the kids in the morning, hand-me-down school uniforms, staff putting their own cash into raising funds, and headteachers paying for cleaners out of their own pocket is the reality in Hartlepool. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a sad indictment of the national funding formula’s effects?

Liz Twist: That is a very distressing tale to hear. There is certainly a huge impact on schools and pupils locally.

Several hon. Members rose—

Liz Twist: I will press on.

Because of the petition, in recent weeks my mailbox has been packed full of stories from school staff and parents across the Blaydon constituency. Sheena, a teaching assistant—a TA—wrote:

“I love my job! I have worked in a local infant school for 30 years as a teaching assistant. But over the last 3 years we have lost 8 members of staff due to redundancies due to lack of funding. We run our school on a skeleton staff. We are unable to buy resources for the children due to lack of funding (staff sometimes use their own money!). We have just gone through the redundancy process again, losing another TA, which leaves us with 2 TAs in a school with 6 classes (3 classes are Early Years Foundation Stage, which require a TA). Does this mean we have to turn children away because of lack of staff? In turn, this means less funding! Teachers without a TA have to leave their ‘teaching’ to see to poorly children, first aid and collecting resources, all because of reduced funding to schools. Not having a TA in every classroom...does have a detrimental effect on our children, especially the slower learners and SEN children.”

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Ind): The hon. Lady comes on to talk about teachers, and it seems to me that the impact is not only on the children. We risk those in this much-needed profession being too exhausted and stressed to cope with the additional pressures and workload. We risk alienating them from the profession altogether.

Liz Twist: Yes, I most certainly agree. When visiting schools, I see the enthusiasm that teachers have, but also the strain they are under because of the lack of support and resources.

Susan, another teaching assistant, said:

“As staff, our main concern is the welfare of the children in our care. We are making as many adjustments as we can to try to absorb these cuts with minimum disruption to the education we provide for the children. But there is only so much we can do!”

And Dominic, a secondary schoolteacher, wrote:

“This is at a time when students in general appear to have greater needs. The rates of mental illness are on the increase. We have a talented team of pastoral and welfare teachers who would willingly spend more time one-to-one with students, but who have no time because they are dealing with endless cases of misbehaviour. There are increasing incidents of self-harm, internal taunting and bullying, which could be addressed with more money for more staff.”

I have received dozens more stories from parents and governors as well as from staff, and I am sure colleagues will share their own experiences.

For headteachers, parents, teaching and non-teaching staff, governors, and—most of all—children, this should not be about politics, and the petitioners have made that clear in speaking to me. Our schools simply want to...
go about their jobs, delivering high standards of education, and preparing our children and young people for life, ensuring that they have the best possible start. We cannot afford not to fund our schools properly.

Sir David, the petitioners do not just want me to tell you how hard things are because of the funding problems they face; they want to ask the Minister for some action, to provide adequate funding—fair funding—for our children and young people. They call on the Government to increase funding for schools, so that they can provide the education their pupils need.

Mr Ramanandi was talking to me earlier about how tomorrow he will be telling his staff at St Joseph’s the outcome of his funding and redundancy consultation—not something he is looking forward to. He would like to tell them that in the future his school will be able to offer the broad, rounded curriculum and supportive environment that makes our children healthy, rounded people who have had the best start in life. I hope that the Minister is able to tell Mr Ramanandi that he can do that, because of the actions the Government have taken. I also invite the Minister to join me in visiting the schools in Gateshead, to see the great work they are doing.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): Order. I am going to need to call the Front Benchers at 7 pm, so that leaves about two hours for Back Benchers. Given the numbers of Back Benchers standing, I am going to limit speeches to four minutes, but that may well have to be reduced later.

5 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Much like Elizabeth Taylor’s latest husband said, it is difficult to bring something new to a debate that we have had so many times. There is a real sense of déjà vu, and the number of Members present shows the extent of the problem up and down the country.

Having spoken in just about every other debate on this subject for some time, I want to bring one new thing to the debate today, which is that the forthcoming recommended 2% pay increase for teachers is going to have a serious effect on the already fragile budgets of many of our schools. Last year, 1% was to be funded by schools, with the rest largely funded by central Government; this year, responsibility for funding the full 2% will fall on schools, whose budgets are already highly stretched. When I tabled a question to the Minister, asking what sustainability criteria had been taken into account, I was sent a circular that said:

“we know there is considerable scope for schools to improve their efficiency and use of resources...”

the Department for Education’s—

“high-level analysis indicates that if the 25% of schools spending the highest amounts on each category of non-staff expenditure were instead spending at the level of the rest, this could save over £1 billion that could be spent on improving teaching.”

The problem is that over many years, certainly in West Sussex and in my constituency, schools have taken all their surplus expenditure out of the system. In some cases, they are now spending over 90% of their budget on staffing, which leaves a tiny pot from which those schools can supposedly take further savings to pay for that increase. That is going to be a problem. Running schools, or paying for pupils in our schools, has not got any cheaper since last year.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tim Loughton: I will give way very quickly, if I get an extra minute.

Mr Bailey: On the issue of pressure on teacher’s pay, I have had a communication from a headteacher in my constituency about the upcoming 40% increase in teachers’ pension contributions. Teachers in my constituency are absolutely desperate, because they do not know how they are going to fund those contributions within the existing levels of teaching grant and budget support.

Tim Loughton: Indeed; I mentioned just one aspect of the further upcoming expenditure and pressure. I will not take any more interventions, because I do not seem to have got an extra minute for that one, so that was probably a mistake.

Last year, I got together all the chairs of governors from all the schools in my constituency to tell me, in real-life terms, what impact the funding pressures were having on their schools. I did a similar exercise with all the headteachers. A lot of national figures and a lot of misinformation have been thrown at us from all sides, and some of the campaigns in our constituencies have been highly politicised. Simply because I put a DFE press release on my website, one head of a secondary school in my constituency wrote to all the parents of the children in his school castigating me, despite my having been in every single debate on this subject and having stood side by side with parents, teachers and others to get fairer funding. Politicising those campaigns does not help. If we are going to get a better deal, we need to work together with heads, parents and governors, as I have been trying to do.

Rather than all sorts of misinformation, I got hard information and I wrote an eight-page letter, which I am happy to give to all hon. Members. About the impacts that funding pressures are having on our schools. Shortfalls are being clawed back by reducing staffing costs, which in some cases account for 90% of a school’s budget. Senior leadership teams are covering classes. Extracurricular activities and trips are being culled, and certain subjects are being taken off the curriculum altogether. In one school, teaching assistant support has been reduced by over 200 hours. Higher level teaching assistants are being used to cover classes so that school cuts’ effects on supply staff are lessened, and I am afraid that in some cases, quality is being compromised. Just today, I got an email from the head of a primary school in my constituency, which said:

“We have a long waiting list of children who benefit from work with a therapist (who works here two days a week), she has had a great deal of success with children with social and emotional needs; we are not sure if we can maintain her hours. The danger is that some of these children who could and would have been able to engage and flourish in education and society will end up costing society a great deal more than the adequate funding of their needs in school”

because they are missing out.

This is a national emergency. In West Sussex, it has been an emergency for some years. We need to have fair funding now; it is a false economy for our children if we do not.
5.4 pm

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): The school in my constituency that seems to have the biggest problem with budget reductions is Cardinal Hume Catholic School. That name should be familiar to the Minister and the Secretary of State, because they came to that secondary school to launch the opportunity fund for the north-east. It should be remembered that the opportunity fund for the north-east will not actually benefit Gateshead, but they came to my constituency to launch it anyway.

Cardinal Hume Catholic School is one of many schools in my constituency—too many to mention—that are struggling to provide services for the children in their schools, many of them in very deprived communities. We should bear in mind that Gateshead has an unemployment problem that has been on the increase, year on year since last year, and month by month in that same period. Some 7% of the working population are now unemployed, and many others are underemployed. There is significant deprivation in that patch.

What headteachers wanted to impress on me, and asked me to impress on the House as well, was that because of significant cuts to a range of other services, there is pressure on them to try to backfill for those cuts: for the welfare reform, for the cuts in local authority services and children’s services—for all of the cuts that have been made. Some 26 schools are due to have a negative budget by the end of the 2019-20 budget round, in a context where headteachers across the borough and the region are struggling to provide for the children in their schools, many of them in very deprived communities. We should bear in mind that Gateshead has an unemployment problem that has been on the increase, year on year since last year, and month by month in that same period. Some 7% of the working population are now unemployed, and many others are underemployed. There is significant deprivation in that patch.

Because of the concerns, particularly welfare concerns, that headteachers in our schools have about the children in their care, they are trying to provide services that used to be provided but sadly no longer exist. By the way, it is not just the DFE that was involved: the DFE was part of that process, but the simple fact is that when I resigned, or had to retire, as the deputy leader of Gateshead Council in 2010, we had an annual revenue budget of £310 million. The commensurate figure this year is £200 million. Some £110 million has gone out of the annual revenue budget of that local authority, while at the same time we have taken place since 2018. I know that Government Members sometimes struggle to get their heads around this issue, but the simple fact is that when I resigned, or had to retire, as the deputy leader of Gateshead Council in 2010, we had an annual revenue budget of £310 million. The commensurate figure this year is £200 million. Some £110 million has gone out of the annual revenue budget of that local authority, while at the same time demand, particularly for children’s services and adult social care, has grown like Topsy.

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Representatives of the teaching profession tell us that a minimum of £2 billion needs to be restored to the system; possibly £2.7 or £2.8 billion, and perhaps as much as £5 billion if we are to keep all services’ funding in line with inflation. That might be pie in the sky, but we should not expect great benefits for children, particularly those in deprived areas, when services have been cut and headteachers are being expected to pick up the slack. Those benefits are not going to happen without significant investment. Invest in our children and our schools.

5.8 pm

Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. At the start, I pay tribute to the many teachers and teaching assistants in my constituency; I do not often get to publicly pay tribute to them, and this is a timely moment to do so. They are some of the best public servants that we have, along with all of the others who we routinely talk about. However, in the context of what has become such a toxic debate, it has to be remembered that MPs are public servants too, and that MPs on all sides of the House are trying to do the best that they can. Some of these debates have become so unpleasant that we are slowing down progress that might put some of these things right for our constituents, our schools, and our teachers and teaching assistants.

During debates on this subject, we routinely hear two sides of the story: the Opposition side and the Government side. The Government have a good tale to tell on schools. I know as I say that that some people will laugh and make comments, but it is not right to say that there is only one side of the story.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): The Institute for Fiscal Studies talks about real-terms cuts of 8%. When Members go through the Division Lobby and vote for such policies, people—teachers, parents and the community—will remember.

Royston Smith: This is the very point I am trying to make. If we are to make progress, we need to listen to Members such as my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), who are talking about how politicised the debate has become, We know that more needs to be done. We know that schools need more money. I know that schools in my constituency are struggling with their budgets, but it does not do to constantly—[Interruption.] That is the point I am trying to make. Every time someone tries to make a point, it becomes a political argument. We do not make progress by saying one side is right and the other side is wrong. Many of the increases to school budgets we have seen in recent years have been in no small part due to the lobbying skills of people like my hon. Friend. Those increases have come about because of such people, not because they have always been playing the political game.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. He says there are two sides; surely one is funding and the other is outcomes and standards, which are ultimately what matters. Does he agree that we are seeing real and significant improvements, particularly in phonics and GCSE results, that mean our children will do better in life? That is what matters, surely.

Royston Smith: That is exactly the point, and it should be what we talk about. We should be talking about our children, their outcomes and their future and not constantly make it a political battle.

School budgets have increased, but I concede they have not increased enough. [Interruption.] If Members could just allow me to get on to the points they might agree with, we might make some progress. The teacher and teaching assistant to pupil ratio in my Southampton constituency is around 10 children to one adult. When I went to school—I concede it was a long time ago—it was 30 kids in a class, sat in rows with one teacher and a blackboard. I know we do not want to go back to
those days, but things have changed beyond all recognition even from, when my daughter went to school about 10 years ago. We never seem to do anything to acknowledge that, and we should, because otherwise we sound like we are moaning and whining and nothing is ever good enough.

I concede—this is important, because this is what people say, and they are right to say it—that pension contributions and national insurance are increasing. The national living wage has increased. Pupil numbers are rising. Inflation has not stood still. Pay has been held down and is quite rightly starting to rise. They are additional pressures, and they need to be funded.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that what we need is proper funding, ideological approach to academies.

right back to academisation and this Government’s overall school system and the malaise that can be taken.

been called early in the debate, and I will try to be brief. In the very short time I have, I would like to focus on the overall school system and the malaise that can be taken right back to academisation and this Government’s ideological approach to academies.

Academies, which were originally designed to introduce a degree of competition and choice for parents, have become a system in which there is no more local oversight and scrutiny. It has therefore become incredibly difficult to get to the bottom of the funding problem. Eight years ago, school oversight was done by the local authority.

In my authority of Bath and North East Somerset, the council’s schools management budget was just under £1.8 million. That paid for the director of schools and the school support officers for all 78 schools in the borough.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I sit on the board of a multi-academy trust in the constituency I am privileged to represent. Many of the other governors who sit on various different academy boards are also locally resident. They provide rather better oversight than many local authorities.

Wera Hobhouse: I too am a board member of one of my local academy trusts. The oversight provided through the local education authority, the overview and scrutiny committee in the council and the direct accountability of local councillors, was better than what the boards can do.

Bath now has 10 multi-academy trusts. That is 10 management structures, 10 chief executives on similar pay to the LEA director of education and 10 lots of support staff. Additionally, we have the new regional schools commissioner and their staff, which is another chunk of overheads.

Education funding in Bath has dropped by 8.8%, or £414 a pupil, over the past seven years. The Education Secretary said that good teachers, not management structures, create good teaching, but in our 2019 education system, where national trusts and commissioners support regional trusts and commissioners, far too little funding reaches individual schools, let alone individual teachers and students. Here in Parliament we must ask how such management structures enrich and add value to our children’s education. If money is paying for management at the expense of teachers, we should know about it.

We should have transparency about where education money goes in Bath and elsewhere. Ten years ago there was, with schools under the oversight of the local authority and councillors on the governing bodies; there were local overview and scrutiny committees and councillors were answerable to the community and parents. That is no longer the case. Local accountability has been replaced by multi-academy trusts accountable to Whitehall. Often they operate over several local authority areas, and that is a problem.

Multi-academy trusts provide excellent education, but so do local authority schools. If academies cost more to provide the same education, we should know about it. Where are the comparative figures? I have tried to find out how we can compare what happened in 2010 with what happens now, but that is difficult because we do not have local figures anymore and multi-academy trusts can keep the figures to themselves. If they cost more, we should know about it. Our children’s education matters. If the changes introduced over the past 10 years cost extra in management and overheads at the same time as per pupil funding has fallen by 8.8% in Bath, let us be open and talk about it. Let us have fair comparisons
and find solutions to ensure that funding goes to the frontline and to our young people, not to the management of a fragmented system.

5.19 pm

**James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on a fine speech. Obviously, we all sympathise with the points she made because there are concerns in our schools. I have just had a letter from the Stour Valley Trust in my constituency, and I have forwarded it to the Minister. There are significant concerns: capital is the one that schools in Suffolk mention the most. However, there is a positive picture to paint, particularly in relation to standards.

On Friday, I had an inspirational visit to a primary school in my constituency. I have 42 primaries, most of which are tiny and in very small rural areas. Hadleigh Community Primary School, which I went to on Friday, is exceptional because it has 500 pupils. I went to Edgware Primary School in north London, which has 680 pupils, but in South Suffolk Hadleigh primary is very large. It has just gone from “requires improvement” to “good”. Its excellent headteacher, Gary Pilkington, asked me to give the Minister a message: that the funding situation is improving significantly because of the change in the formula.

It is all well and good people denying the point about how the cake is divided, but on the Government side of the House, where many of us represent rural constituencies, we have disadvantage, too. We have poverty in rural areas. When a child has special needs there should be no difference in the amount they receive, wherever they are in the country, and we have campaigned for such principles. From the evidence that I am getting, that is now leading to more funding getting through.

**Sandy Martin** (Ipswich) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**James Cartlidge**: I am delighted to give way to my neighbour.

**Sandy Martin**: Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that the so-called fair funding formula has disadvantaged Ipswich and Lowestoft far more than the rest of Suffolk? Those are the places where there are the largest problems with SEN provision and the lowest levels of attainment. Does he not accept that it does not necessarily make sense to provide exactly the same resources for every child?

**James Cartlidge**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but, if we were disadvantaging the other schools in Suffolk, standards in Suffolk would not be improving. The statistics show very strong improvement in Suffolk. In March this year, just under 90% of Suffolk schools held Ofsted ratings of “good” or “outstanding” compared with 72% in December 2013. We have seen significant improvements in GCSEs: 64% of students in Suffolk now achieve the expected standard in English and maths, putting Suffolk in the top third of local authorities. The county has risen from 67th to 42nd out of 151 local authorities ranked on Progress 8 schools, which is a significant improvement. If Lowestoft and Ipswich, our biggest towns, were struggling to badly, we would not be attaining such improvements.

I have only one minute left, so I will make my key point. Yes, spending is important, but, with respect, Opposition Members focus relentlessly on that when standards and outcomes are what ultimately matter. What matters is the education our children achieve, the grades they get, how our country performs, and how they will be able to compete in a global marketplace.

**Dr Wollaston**: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that wellbeing and mental health are also important? Would he support the campaign being run by YoungMinds, who are in Parliament today to tell Ofsted to count in mental health and wellbeing in our schools?

**James Cartlidge**: With the extra time belatedly allocated, I can say that I see a role for that. It is timely because a report on SEND in Suffolk was published today, and I am afraid Suffolk is still struggling. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) said earlier in his intervention, there is a growing awareness of the problems that we see in special needs children who are on the spectrum, and of the extra funding that that requires, so I agree that mental health and so on should be included.

On the point about standards, in the modern labour market our children might go out to compete globally, working abroad or competing with people coming here from other countries that have rigorous and high-quality education systems. Our children have to be able to compete. If we look at international comparisons, not only do we have the highest funding in the G7 on state primary and secondary—something to be proud of—but our international progress on all the key markers is also improving. We must be doing something right. We are now in joint 8th place internationally on phonics; the best position we have had since the test started in 2001. That is in large part down to my right hon. Friend the Minister.

For me, this is the most important statistic: compared with 2009, the last year when the Opposition were in power, 18-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds are now 50% more likely to go to university. That is social mobility. We have to pay for it and find the money, but we have to see the positives. Significant improvements are being made, but we need to continue to find a fairer formula that benefits constituencies such as South Suffolk.

5.24 pm

**Kate Osamor** (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate Andrew Ramanandi, the headteacher of St Joseph’s Primary School in Blaydon, for starting the e-petition. Without his hard work on the petition, we would not be here today discussing this very important issue. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on speaking so eloquently and on taking so many interventions in opening this fantastic debate.

I want to focus on how the Government’s policy of austerity in education is harming the wellbeing and life chances of my constituents in Edmonton, especially children with special educational needs. Austerity has
created an £8.5 million annual funding shortfall in Edmonton. Every single school in my constituency has had its funding cut since 2015. Furthermore, Edmonton, ranked the 50th most deprived constituency in England in 2015, has suffered some of the worst cuts in funding per pupil in the country.

Since 2010, owing to pernicious funding cuts from central Government, Enfield Council has been forced to find £178 million of savings, but further cuts mean that the council has to find £18 million to draw out of essential services by 2020. That £18 million is more than Enfield’s current net spending on housing services, leisure, culture, libraries, parks and open spaces combined. In an already struggling community, the education and overall life chances of every single pupil in Edmonton are being systematically undermined by the Government.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree with me that London’s education has been transformed thanks to investment by the previous Labour Government, but the cuts of £16 million in five years under the Conservative Government—including in constituencies such as mine, which has the highest child poverty rate in the country—make a mockery of the so-called fair funding formula as it does not take into account the deprivation indices facing our constituents? If the Government are serious about maintaining and improving education standards and making our education world class, they should continue to invest in all areas.

Kate Osamor: My hon. Friend makes a valuable point. I will share the story of a parent whom I saw in one of my surgeries. The parent has a child with a developmental disability. He spends around £800 per month on one-to-one sessions for his child’s needs, which the family cannot get the council to pay for. Without the sessions, the family believe their child will have no hope of an independent life in future, but paying for the sessions is financially ruining the whole family.

I have also heard reports of children in Edmonton with statements, or education, health and care plans, who receive no special provision at all, or who receive a fraction of the legally required support, because schools and the local authority simply cannot afford it. Worryingly, some councils are pushing back against parents seeking legitimate support for their children, which has led to almost nine in 10 cases taken to tribunals across the UK finding in favour of parents. Every tribunal case is a finding in favour of parents. Every tribunal case is a finding in favour of parents. 

Time is against me, so I will end by saying that I want the Minister to please listen to the cries from all of us here today. All our children need fairer funding—some children even more than others.

5.29 pm

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I am pleased to be able to speak today in support of the petition. I congratulate the hon. Member for Blythdon (Liz Twist) on putting this important debate before the House, and of course it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David.

I believe in investing money wisely in things with a proven record of return, and there can be no greater stock worth investing in than our children’s education. It is true: never has more public money been spent on education, and the Government should be commended for that. The diversion of an extra £1.2 billion is a good start, but, bluntly, I want more cash for schools in my constituency.

I was pleased that more than 1,000 residents from Hazel Grove signed the petition, placing us 14th in the ranking. That reflects not only how strongly local residents feel about the proper funding of their children’s schools, but the fact that they are becoming ever more aware of the unfair imbalances in funding that have left local authorities such as Stockport underfunded for decades.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that one issue facing schools is that they are being asked to do more to support children with special educational needs and disabilities? We understand those conditions better and we have legislated in this House to raise standards and entitlements for those children. We need to ensure that schools and councils have the resources to provide what we have asked them to.

Mr Wragg: Yes—it is high time that the resources caught up with that justifiable expectation.

Since being elected as the MP for Hazel Grove, I have sought to build strong professional relationships with the schools and headteachers in my constituency, and I am grateful for their insights on school funding. I am particularly grateful to those who have met me. I will rattle through the schools quickly, because they all deserve a name check. They include: Romiley Primary School, Norbury Hall Primary School, Brookside Primary School, Torkington Primary School, St Stephen’s RC Primary School, Fairway Primary School, Ludworth Primary School, Mellor Primary School, Werneth School, Harrytown Catholic High School and Marple Hall School. I defy other Members to mention as many schools as that. They have all provided me with important facts and financial analyses of what my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) has said is the real impact of the lack of funding.

Of the 25 schools in my constituency, four will receive an increase of under 1%, and 10 will receive an increase of under 3%—only four will receive a sizeable increase of 5% under the new formula. We are asking not for the world: merely resources comparable to those of similar schools in different parts of the country. It is inherently unfair to expect schools with similar characteristics to achieve the same results on wildly differing budgets.

It is a timely coincidence that the Education Committee, of which I am a member—I am pleased to see many august members of the Committee present this afternoon—is conducting an inquiry into both school and college funding. The evidence that we have received from across the sector points towards the true figure needed to address the historical imbalances, as the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) indicated earlier. It is not the DFE’s current £1.2 billion, but at least £2.1 billion.
[Mr Wragg]

I know that Education Ministers will argue strongly for their budget in the forthcoming spending review, but can the Minister indicate whether that figure is on the cards? The evidence suggests that that is what is really needed to get school funding to where it needs to be, so that schools can stop endlessly worrying about making ends meet and focus on the business of providing great education.

I have a specific question for the Minister. Writing to us in September on pension contributions, the Education Secretary said:

“There will be a consultation and it is the Government’s firm intention to fully fund schools for the additional pressure that the pension contributions place on their budget, ensuring that the core schools budget continues to be protected.”

Can the Minister confirm that this afternoon?

I congratulate all Members on taking part in the debate. I thank the 1,000 of my constituents who signed the petition. I hope that in the spending review we can give good news to our local schools, and give them the cash that they need.

5.34 pm

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) for leading the debate.

Last week, I spoke in the estimates debate on education funding, appealing for increased funding for our schools and colleges. Seemingly, every Education Committee inquiry references the lack of appropriate funding, or misdirected funding, as a cause of many of the problems. As a teacher and headteacher of 34 years—I am not speaking politically now, but personally, as a professional—I get so frustrated by the fact that we, and teachers, have come cap in hand to such debates to appeal for funding so often, when it is every child’s right to have a quality education. However, I thank the teachers, headteachers and parents who signed the petition and brought it to Parliament for the debate.

My colleagues, both in education and in politics, will no doubt agree that the passion and determination of those in the education sector should never be underestimated. That passion drives teachers, teaching assistants and others, who want children to get the best education possible, to take on extra work and responsibilities, or to use their own money to buy learning resources that schools cannot afford. However, it should not be like that. It should not be the case that 95% of schools in my constituency are facing real-terms cuts in per-pupil funding.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): Schools in my constituency in Bedford and Kempston will lose £1,000 per primary school class, and £1,600 per secondary school class, despite the Government’s promises that the national funding formula would fix everything. The reality is that class sizes are going up, and school funding is going down. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government are hopelessly out of touch regarding the reality is that class sizes are going up, and school funding is going down. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government are hopelessly out of touch regarding the class sizes? They have made it work, and made it work. They are now crossing red lines, and can no longer deliver proper provision for the children in their schools.

Colne Valley secondary schools should not have a total annual shortfall of more than £1,360,000, and primary schools a total of more than £1,720,000. It is not difficult to see how rising pupil numbers and reductions in funding are putting schools in a terrible position.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I reinforce my hon. Friend’s point about headteachers being at the end of their tether. One of my constituents, who is an officer for the National Association of Headteachers, and who happens to be in the Gallery, organised a very useful meeting for me with headteachers from across my constituency. Like my hon. Friend, a number of them have been in the teaching profession for decades. Several of them also said that under no previous Government had they seen anything like such large cuts. Does she agree, and has she heard the same from her headteachers?

Thelma Walker: I absolutely concur. I can speak personally about that. Under the last Labour Government, I had a headship for two schools and had a school with a Sure Start centre, which was funded adequately and making a real difference to the quality of children’s and families’ lives. I can speak personally about the investment from the previous Labour Government.

At my latest meeting with Colne Valley headteachers, I was told that funding issues have led to cuts in staffing and resources, and difficulties in SEND provision. I know that that is the case for headteachers up and down the country. The cuts have also limited opportunities for learning in schools. A recent report by the Fabian Society found that there has been a dramatic decline in arts provision in primary schools, and that it is of a poorer quality than in 2010.

It is the same for modern foreign languages. Analysis from the BBC shows a drop in the number of pupils taking a GCSE language course of between 50% and 50%. The Sixth Form Colleges Association revealed that 50% of schools and colleges have dropped courses in modern foreign languages because of funding pressures, with A-levels in German, French and Spanish the main casualties. The hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) spoke about equipping schoolchildren for being the future workforce. A decline in the number of young people taking modern foreign languages will have a negative impact on that.

The funding cuts not only put an unnecessary and unwelcome amount of pressure on professionals; they take away from what should be a broad and balanced curriculum. The Government need to listen to professionals—on issues in the system, and on the types of learning and environment that benefit children and the level of resources that it will take to deliver them. Decisions should be responsive to what is happening, and should not trivialise concerns, offering only “little extras” here and there. I know that the people supporting the campaign better to fund our schools, colleges and sixth forms will keep going. I hope that today’s debate reassures them that they have allies in this place who are listening and who will stand with them.
Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on opening the debate. I also thank my fellow West Sussex MP, my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), for his speech; I endorse his comments about the pressure on school budgets in our county.

Last week, I was privileged to take part in a Westminster Hall debate on global education. It is absolutely right that this country does all it can to ensure that education is improved in developing countries, because that is important for the future prosperity and security of us all. We should never forget that children and young people in this country have a very privileged education in comparison, but there have been extraordinary pressures on our school system.

Historically, West Sussex has been very underfunded. I see many Labour Members present; I am pleased that the debate is well subscribed, but when I was leader of West Sussex County Council—a local education authority—between 2003 and 2010, I saw schools in my county being significantly underfunded. During the Administrations of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, per-pupil funding in metropolitan areas such as London was almost double what it was for my local schools, and I certainly did not hear complaints from Labour Members.

I welcome the important £28 million funding increase for West Sussex schools under the new national funding formula. I also welcome the increase to 200 places at Manor Green School, a special school in my constituency, but we need to go further still. The historical underfunding of West Sussex schools under the Blair and Brown years has left a lot to make up for. The additional funding under the national funding formula is very welcome, but the pressures that have been described today need to be better addressed by the Department for Education.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): I am glad to hear that the hon. Gentleman’s constituency’s schools are getting more funding. If more money is being spent in some schools, that is great, but how does he justify the fact that schools in areas such as North Tyneside are losing 3% funding per pupil? It does not make the balance any better. Surely he cannot rejoice that his schools are doing better when other schools are losing funding.

Henry Smith: I certainly would not advocate that schools in one part of the country should lose to benefit schools in other parts, which is what happened under the last Labour Government: schools in my constituency of Crawley were given about half the funding of their equivalents in metropolitan areas, particularly here in the capital. I believe that funding for pupils should be made available across the whole country. The historical underfunding needs to be addressed; it is beginning to be addressed, but if we are to properly equip our young people and support teachers to ensure that our young people have the best education, we will need more still.

I should have declared an interest at the beginning of my speech: when I was leader of West Sussex County Council, I was chair of the West Sussex learning disability partnership; I am also currently a vice-president of the British Dyslexia Association. I will end with a plea to the Department for special needs to receive extra attention. Those children and young people deserve our support so that they can have a start in life equal to that of all other pupils up and down the country.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on introducing this important debate.

I would like to focus in detail on one consequence of school underfunding for an inclusive education system. Rising demand for specialist provision in mainstream schooling, which is already facing an undue burden from cuts, is resulting in a two-tier education system and in the disappearance of the different and the disabled from our mainstream schools. Parents across Bury all too frequently share heart-wrenching stories of their struggles—often years long—to get the support that is needed for their children with special educational needs and disabilities in the mainstream school system. That failure is sponsored by Government direction, budget cuts and the narrowing field in which we judge our children to have succeeded.

In our inquiry into SEND, the Education Committee has uncovered a crisis. Parents are forced to fight with schools and local authorities through tribunals, often at great emotional and financial cost to their families, to secure the specialist provision needed to ensure that their daughter or son fulfils their potential.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentions children who have special educational needs or are disabled. In many instances, children with higher needs have actually been removed from mainstream schools and moved into a separate education system in which they are not getting the support that they require.

James Frith: I absolutely agree. It seems to me that in the education system, we ignore everything that we would deem important when using the word “special” in any other context. Enhanced provision, accurate service, more rather than less attention—in education, those things are just not happening for those with special educational needs.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has concluded that between 2010 and 2018, total school spending per pupil fell by 8% in real terms. The National Audit Office says that schools will need to make efficiency savings of £3 billion by 2020—8% of the total schools budget. Ever-tightening school budgets are forcing schools to make difficult and often short-term decisions about lower-level preventive SEND support that would meet the needs of many children without the need for statutory plans and interventions. The failure in mainstream specialist provision creates a perverse incentive to push for education, health and care plans: 320,000 children and young people had EHC plans last year, which represents an increase of 35% since 2014. Schools have to find the first £6,000 for the additional support needed—yet another burden on their budgets.

The Local Government Association has warned of a £500 million SEND funding gap for 2018-19, which is set to increase to £1.6 billion by 2021. Local authorities have stated in evidence to the Education Committee that spending their already limited budget on facing
down the legal challenges at increasing numbers of education tribunals is politically and practically more palatable than funding mainstream schooling better in the first place, even though that would be a preventive measure. When appeals go to tribunal, 90% of decisions are found in favour of parents. The number of cases going to tribunal has increased year on year since 2014, at an average cost of £6,000—70 million quid overall. That money would be better spent on improving SEND provision, instead of on the “crisis first, crisis only” provision that there is under this Government.

At every stage of the Government’s education system, we can see the Tory-touted promise of opportunity becoming wasted opportunity. Nursery providers are being forced to ask parents for money. Schools are riddled with asbestos and face a £100 million shortfall. Capital funding has disappeared. Teacher recruitment and retention are at crisis point. College funding is stagnating. Lifelong learning budgets have been gutted by 32% this decade.

I say to the Government: spend more upstream in mainstream. Instead of just increasing the budget, move the money upstream, reach into the system and enable the simple change of frame that is required. Our country deserves a world-class education service for all, from nursery to university and lifelong learning—one where every child matters, can fulfil their potential and take advantage of a lifelong education system that is based on inclusivity and difference, and repeated opportunities.

5.50 pm

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. When I was first elected to the House almost 22 years ago, the problem in Gloucestershire was that we were underfunded due to something called the area cost adjustment. It has taken a long time to start to correct that, as this Government have done. We lost out not just to inner-city areas, which received a lot more money per pupil, but to other rural areas that got much more than Gloucestershire did.

I was very pleased that this Government agreed to set up the national funding formula. That was good news, but we need to start to see the fairness of the formula coming through a bit more quickly. If we continue at a very slow pace—we let us say that it takes 20 years for there to be an equalisation of funding per pupil—three or four generations of pupils will lose out. I say to the Minister, “Well done so far, but perhaps we need it to happen a little bit quicker than it is happening at the moment.”

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that we have the wrong Minister responding to this debate? That is in no way a personal criticism of him—quite the opposite. I believe that he and his colleagues in the Department for Education are listening, but they can allocate only the funding they are provided by the Treasury. Is it not the Chancellor who should be answering our requests for more funding for our constituencies? Should not our key request to the Minister be to ask him to take back to the Chancellor our calls for more funding for our constituencies?

Mr Robertson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and am absolutely delighted that the schools Minister is here to listen. He and his colleagues have an open-door policy: they are always prepared to meet hon. Members and listen to their concerns. I take the point that the Education Secretary and his Ministers can divide the cake only in certain ways, and it is their decision. Perhaps we need to grow the cake, which is the point my hon. Friend correctly makes.

I want to turn to higher needs funding. I welcome the fact that, again, the Department listened to many of us who said that higher needs requires more spending. Several colleagues did that, and more money was forthcoming, which is very welcome. Although I welcome recognition of the problem, even after receiving more money, Conservative-controlled Gloucestershire will have a shortfall in higher needs funding this year, and it will increase next year. We need to see more money going into that.

I have two absolutely excellent special schools in my constituency—Alderman Knight and Milestones—and I recognise that mainstream schools are also struggling with this particular issue. My hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith) made the point that when we were at school many years ago, class sizes were bigger and there was no such thing as a teaching assistant—that was also the case when I was the chairman of governors at a primary school. However, I accept and recognise that there are now greater and more complex higher needs, and more pupils with them, than there were in those days. I fully accept that we need to do more in that respect.

I met about 40 or 50 school governors on Saturday morning, along with my hon. Friends the Members for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) and for Gloucester (Richard Graham) and the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew). It was a very good debate, but one teacher said that a teacher at her school had been assaulted by a pupil. I have seen that happen in other schools, and one of the problems is that there are not enough staff in schools. I asked them, “If you had a load more money, what would you spend it on?” The answer was more staff and perhaps better facilities in schools.

I recognise that the Government have given more money for capital spending, but also that there are problems in schools. Fairly recently, I had a school that was actually dangerous—there was asbestos in it and the windows were very dangerous and almost literally falling out. The Government came forward with emergency money for that. It is an issue that we have to recognise.

I started by saying that when I came to this place, there were different reasons for concerns about school funding. Although we are getting absolutely excellent education in our schools—the ones I visit are amazing in the work they are doing, and my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) is right to point out that outcomes matter at the end of the day—I have never known the concern about school funding to be as strong as it is now. That is not in any way to deny what the Government have done, or to deny the progress that has been made; it is recognising that there is a real problem.

5.55 pm

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship in this incredibly important debate, Sir David. I am proud that nearly
two years on since local parents, children, support staff, teachers, headteachers, Fair Funding For All Schools, the Labour party and I protested in Nantwich town centre and marched in our thousands on the streets of Sandbach, my constituency is still demanding answers to the crisis the Government and 10 years of austerity have inflicted on our education system. We still come in the top 10 constituencies in the country for responding to this petition, and I thank every single person who took the time to do so.

Since being elected, I have spoken many times about the funding crisis that has gripped our schools. I speak as an ex-teacher, an educational campaigner, a parent and now as a Member of Parliament and as vice-chair of the f40 group, which represents the worst-funded authorities in the country. Today I speak on behalf of all of those brave professionals who continue to stick their head above the parapet and speak honestly about life in schools. In Crewe and Nantwich, they constantly hear the misleading claim that this Government are providing more money for schools than ever before, but they know full well that they have faced real-terms cuts on a massive scale. After all, 100% of schools in my constituency have experienced such cuts. They do an amazing job at trying to deliver the best experience they can for the children and families that attend, but it is becoming an impossible task.

I regularly meet head teachers in my area, both as a collective and as individuals. Without exception, they relay the same message: they cannot shave any more meat off the bones of their budgets. They are demoralised and devastated, and they feel let down, because teachers believe that every child matters—that is a fundamental idea that should unite everybody in this place whenever we discuss education. It is the belief that every child matters that inspired me to go into teaching.

I want to focus specifically on the issue of SEND provision. It is not only the first topic mentioned by the majority of headteachers, but shows that somewhere along the line this Government lost the belief that every child matters. The f40 campaign states that the funding currently available is not enough to deliver education for the modern world. All SEND in schools has increased dramatically in recent years, including the low levels of SEN. Schools are dealing with those higher levels, an increase in pupil numbers and the increase in the cost of running a school, while their budgets have been slashed in real terms.

Mrs Hodgson: On the issue of SEND, I want to mention the importance of teaching assistants. UNISON, which is represented in the Gallery by its regional director in the north-east, recognises their importance. My daughter is a newly qualified teacher in her first year of teaching and has said that she has a number of children in her class with special educational needs, yet she has only one teaching assistant for a few hours. Does my hon. Friend recognise how detrimental this is to those children?

Laura Smith: I am very pleased to hear that my hon. Friend’s daughter is going into the profession. I cannot speak highly enough of the talents of the teaching assistants and support staff who work in schools. They are desperately needed, and we do not want to see anybody losing teaching assistants.

Just this morning, a headteacher who knew that we were having this debate got in touch with me, saying:

“At my school, budget cuts along with having to fund the first £6k for SEN pupils has forced us into a deficit budget (the first ever) and consequently into a whole school restructure situation which has left us unable to fund any general classroom support. I have had to make redundancies which has curtailed our ability to provide the broad and varied curriculum that OFSTED are now demanding. We are only able to offer teaching assistant support to pupils with EHCPs. I have also had to cut allowances to dedicated and hardworking teachers (who have always gone the extra mile for pupils at my school) leaving them undervalued and demotivated after years of exemplary service which has kept our school one of the most consistent and respected schools in our town.”

The head continued:

“I am only asking for enough money to effectively run a school in the 21st century that supports the needs of ALL pupils not just SEN and deprived children. After all shouldn’t education offer fairness of opportunity to all?”

Minister, I am sick of empty words. I am sick of the fact that so many of my friends in the profession feel crushed. I am sick of those dedicated professionals reporting to me that their mental health is suffering and that they may leave the profession they love. I am sick of the lousy pay that they are expected to work for, while the work piles on. Most of all, I am sick of the Government’s abject disregard for the education of the many children in this country who do not attend a fee-paying school. As a parent, I am sick of the fact that those who care for and nurture my children are so demoralised. I am furious that future generations are being let down so catastrophically. Test results and attainment are a small part of what makes a successful school.

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): Order.

[SIR CHRISTOPHER CHope IN THE CHAIR]

6.1 pm

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I have been a Member of this House for 14 years. Interestingly, for the first decade school funding was not especially an issue in my constituency. The debates we had with the local education authority and West Sussex County Council were more about standards. That is perhaps not surprising, because overall funding per pupil in this country rose considerably over that period, reaching a peak in 2015, when it was 60% higher than in 2000. Overall, until 2015, there was a very big increase in spending per pupil, but from then on, although overall funding for schools was increased, costs—some of which have been alluded to—rose faster. That drew the attention of schools in my constituency to the fact that our county is the worst-funded county education authority and the third-worst funded education authority in the whole country. It is therefore no surprise that three Members from West Sussex have contributed to this debate.

We all accept that needs are considerably higher in other areas of the country. I represent an affluent rural constituency and I have hon. Friends in West Sussex who have urban areas in their constituencies whose needs are much higher than mine. Nevertheless, the inequity—the gap—is very large. Spending per pupil in some other areas of the country is between 50% and 70% higher than it is in West Sussex. We were therefore strong supporters of a national fair funding formula,
and we benefited from the change. In 2017, West Sussex received an extra £28 million through the national funding formula—an increase of 6.5% in its provision—which went more than halfway towards what the £40 campaign estimated we needed to redress the funding gap.

Nevertheless, the rising costs continued to outstrip the income that was provided. The county council adjusted the formula to give more help to primary schools, some of which actually lost under it, and less help to secondaries. Some of the secondary schools in my constituency face deficit budgets and are very concerned. There is a question about whether the formula recognises the basic costs that every school must meet to run.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for emphasising the importance of per-pupil funding. In Newcastle, per-pupil funding has gone down by £240 since 2010. I grew up getting free school meals at a state school. Does he recognise that people on lower incomes have less capacity to do well when funding cuts are made? The pressure put on parents to make up for the funding cuts is higher and cannot be met.

Nick Herbert: Yes, I have already said so. We all recognise that there are areas of the country where needs, and therefore spending needs, are much greater. My point is that all schools need a basic minimum. In the last couple of years, West Sussex schools and some in my constituency have struggled to make ends meet because that minimum has not been reached. Given that their funding was at the lowest level per pupil anyway across the whole country, it is much harder for them to make savings.

When we argued for the national funding formula, we never sought to take money away from other schools; we wanted fair funding for our area. It is much harder to introduce a national funding formula in an environment in which spending is not rising sharply. In the last Budget, a number of public service areas benefited considerably from big increases in spending—notably the national health service, defence and social care. Resources are finite, and every Government must choose how to allocate them. That is exactly what the spending review will be about. There is a case to be made for ensuring that the education budget does not fall in real terms, even if the falls are not quite as catastrophic as has been made out. Spending per pupil in the UK is the highest of any G7 country for primary and secondary schools. If adjustments are allowed to happen and budgets that are already tight receive less money, the only way a lot of schools will make savings is by losing people, and that is not something we want.

6.7 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Christopher.

Over the past few months, I have conducted two surveys in my constituency about the adequacy of school funding and the impact of funding cuts to schools. The first was of the schools concerned, which described the impact of funding cuts on their ability to deliver the educational outcomes that their pupils deserve. The second was of parents, who are all too aware of the impact of the school cuts on their children’s education. I want to channel their voices and tell hon. Members more about schools and parents in Leeds North West and by extension the whole country.

For schools the problem is clear: every school surveyed had experienced the need to make some form of cut since 2015. More than 57% have been forced to make staffing cuts due to funding pressures, and 86% have had to reduce the number of books and the educational equipment available to students. More than half the schools surveyed had to let teaching assistants go, and the same number had to make cuts to cleaning and maintenance services, potentially putting our children at risk.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Teachers and students in my constituency told me just the other day that A-level students have only just been able to get textbooks at this point in their second year of their studies, when they are taking their A-levels in the summer.

Alex Sobel: I thank my hon. Friend for that point, which I will reinforce later in my speech.

All the respondents expected further cuts to be made in the future. Some 43% of schools had experienced a rise in pupil numbers, and 100% of respondents were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. It is uncertain how schools will take on the extra family support obligations created by the cuts to council services elsewhere. One school said:

“We cannot continue to hit the DfE’s expectations for pupil achievement and take more pupils, with less staff and resources. We are at breaking point in this profession. As the council continues to make cuts in other areas, more is put onto schools. We cannot provide the support that is needed for families without the funding to do so.”

The fact that schools are willing to use the term “breaking point” is shocking to me, and should be shocking to the Government.

We heard the same refrain in the parents’ survey. One parent said:

“schools are doing an amazing job and are often the only source of support for children in crisis. Schools should not be trying to provide mental health support and there is no alternative provision for kids with heart-breaking mental health and behavioural issues.”

Another said that

“there is a complete lack of adequate mental health provision for children in primary schools due to funding cuts elsewhere in the system. This is very marked, and I have spoken to a number of parents who are at their wits’ end about where and how to get the right support for their children.”

I had a huge response to my survey. More than 90% of respondents felt that schools had been negatively affected by cuts, and that the cuts were making their children’s education worse.

With those cuts being layered on top of cuts to council services, schools are now clearly at breaking point. That has an effect right across school activities. School trips, for example, are the canary in the coalmine—the first sign that is something going wrong with the school budget. One parent of a year 6 pupil said:

“The head sent out a letter last week explaining that they can no longer subsidise school trips and events in school due to cuts in the school budget. This is very concerning to me … as I know this will prevent a number of children from attending trips … and missing out on the important experiences these trips bring. Also, a lot of class work is focused on the trips children go on” —
so some children cannot go on trips, and that means they are behind on school work. It is not an optional extra, but part of the curriculum of that school.

Children are being left not with the bare minimum of an education, but with an inadequate one, which promises to have knock-on effects for their future and for wider society. Even the most ardent Conservative must be aware that the cost to the public purse of the loss of revenue generated by reduced educational attainment in this country will be far from inconsequential, as will be the social cost of failing in the historical promise that has long linked the old to the young—things will continue to get better, that the future will be brighter and that we pass on the promise of more than we had ourselves. One constituent put it this way:

“As parent and teacher, I firmly believe the quality of education we are providing this generation is dire. Between funding cuts, inaccessible exams, no support for SEN or EAL, no trips and extracurricular activities being squeezed, I see a generation being told they are failures because we are not providing the funding or resources to help anyone except the most well adapted and able pupils to achieve. We are a laughing stock at best. Shame on this Government for letting it get to this.”

Those are not my words, but those of a parent and teacher in my constituency.

6.11 pm

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): Having spoken in the estimates day education debate last week, I do not intend to keep the House long now. However, I thank the 214 people from Colchester who signed the petition, and I declare a small interest in that my wife is a teacher.

I am passionate about education for a number of reasons, but primarily because it is an enabler of social mobility. At the heart of equality is equality of opportunity, and education is very much at the heart of that. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith), I thank teachers in my constituency, who do an amazing job. Pressure on teachers is immense, and they are asked to do more and more every single year.

Only last week, I met a number of teachers and school governors at North Primary School; some of them came from other schools. We discussed the disconnect between the messaging from the Government and the messaging from schools, and how that confuses parents and the wider public. The Government rightly say that that has to be for 10 years, but it needs to be at least three years, so that headteachers and school business managers have the certainty of knowing what funding they will have.

Why have this debate now? We know that more money is going into education but that the cost pressures are rising. I genuinely feel that we are at the precipice. Two, three or four years ago, governors and headteachers were not raising such issues with me. Yes, there were efficiencies to be made in our schools—the Government sent out a helpful toolkit on saving money—but there is now no fat left to trim. Schools have maximised efficiencies, so there is only one place left to go. In a school whose budget is 80% or 90% spent on staff, what else is there to trim apart from staff? When we start to take away staff, we hit educational attainment. We are at the precipice. I fear that we will start to see results decline. I urge the Minister to increase funding for schools.

6.15 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on leading this debate and Mr Ramanandi, who led the creation of the petition, as well as those who organised and signed it throughout the country.

This is the second debate on education this year that I have attended in this Chamber—the first was on college funding—and the pattern is the same: Government party Members wring their hands about the impact of financial cuts in their constituencies. When will they realise that what they are describing is a direct impact of their failed austerity project? We cannot do more with less.

I concur with many points made already by Members in this debate, so I will focus on how the cuts in school funding have impacted in my borough, Hounslow. I have seen at first hand the great work that our schools are doing—23 of our schools are rated outstanding by Ofsted; our secondary schools perform above the UK average in Progress 8 scores; and our primary schools exceed the national average in reading, writing and maths—and that is in a community where the majority of children do not speak English as a first language at home and with high levels of churn in its schools. Hounslow Council has also invested £177 million in capital funding for the expansion of primary, secondary and SEN schooling, but that is all happening despite the steeply rising and unjust cuts being imposed on our schools by the Government.

Other Members have talked about the experience of their constituencies. In Hounslow we have seen cuts in total spending per pupil since 2010, and real-terms cuts in per-pupil funding between 2015 and 2019. Local authority spending on school services has been cut, so
that—if they still exist—they now have to be bought back by schools. Before, schools had them for free and yet now school budgets have been cut, as we have heard so many times. The range of extracurricular and curricular activities supported by councils has gone down and down. This year, schools in Hounslow have lost teachers, teaching assistants, support staff, auxiliary staff and the essential additional support that children in crisis or trouble need in particular.

To give some numbers, we have had an additional 5,640 primary and secondary places in the borough, and a 51% increase in children with special needs or an education, health and care plan since 2012—that is the third highest increase in London—and we face £27 million in funding cuts in 2018-19, with £4.5 million savings in education and early-years provision. Added up, that has a massive impact on the ability of our children to learn with good quality. As others have said, many schools, teachers and parents have expressed concerns about children with special needs in particular.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend’s experience in Hounslow is mirrored in other parts of London, including in my constituency. The headteacher of an outstanding special needs school in my constituency wrote to me, knowing this debate was to take place, to flag that in order to balance her budget she faces having to drastically reduce staffing ratios in her school.

Ruth Cadbury: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that it is both the numbers and the quality of staff at special needs schools that make such a difference to children’s outcomes. But that is for the children who get into the special schools: I hear again and again from parents, teachers and governors about children who desperately need to be assessed. Even once assessed, they desperately need the right support either in their mainstream school or in a special school, but they are not getting it. They have to wait—not because of a lack of will, but because of a lack of professional support and places. In London, we have the additional problem of a massive shortage of professional psychological and psychiatric support in child and adolescent mental health services. Children with special needs who are not supported not only are suffering, with an impact on their future; their troubles have an impact on the other children in the class, affecting their learning. That is unacceptable.

Teachers and governors have written to me about a number of things, including the inability to provide maintenance to replace air conditioning—in Hounslow under the flight path, the windows cannot be opened in summer. Another cannot replace an inclusion mentor and children are not getting the high-quality art and technology support because the technician has had to be cut.

6.21 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): As I said in an intervention on the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), it is about time we had the six-hour debate that this House has been promised. Indeed, 43 Members supported that and I know a lot more who could not sign but wanted that debate, as can be seen in the number of people wanting to speak today. We have only a few minutes, which is nowhere near enough.

We accept that more money has gone in, but if more people are invited to the party, rations have to be spread ever thinner. Many schools are spreading those rations beyond belief. I particularly want to raise a concern that a headteacher told me, which has not been raised yet. She felt guilty about almost heaving a sigh of relief when a very senior member of staff left, because that meant she could take on a more inexperienced junior member of staff and therefore have a bit more give in her budget. I was teacher a long time ago, but I can remember being a probationary teacher, as they were called in those days. We need experienced teachers to lead from the front, to drive schools forward. We cannot expect our schools to constantly rely on a churn of young inexperienced teachers who need to learn on the job, but also make sure they have plenty of time for lesson preparation.

Teachers cannot pay their bills with long holidays, as I used to say to people.

Laura Smith: I find myself agreeing with the hon. Lady, probably because we have both been teachers. She is exactly right with regard to—the point has gone from my brain. Sorry!

Mrs Main: I was right, and that is all that matters. Every Member will be told the same by other schools. In high-value areas such as mine, we cannot pay bills with holidays. Teachers have to pay bills with their salaries. They are struggling to get on the housing ladder in areas as expensive as St Albans, where the average house price is £600,000. Recruiting members of staff is difficult; retaining members of staff is very difficult, as they find their pounds go a lot further elsewhere.

Thelma Walker: On recruitment and retention, for the first time in history, as far as I know, more people are leaving the profession than entering it. One of the issues that headteachers bring to my attention is that many young people who do not have those years of experience are promoted too swiftly when they enter the profession. They are given responsibility, but there is a burnout just a few years later.

Mrs Main: The hon. Lady is absolutely right; there is nothing more demoralising. Teaching is a tough job; anyone who has never tried it should go in front of a classroom and try. I taught in Feltham at an inner London school.

Laura Smith: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Main: No, if she does not mind, because Members on the hon. Lady’s side are waiting to speak. We need those experienced teachers and we must ensure that teachers are not overwhelmed so quickly that they fancy quitting the profession.

I am also worried that we will end up cutting the curriculum to the bone. Gone are the times when there would be the luxury of a peripatetic music teacher coming to schools. There simply is no latitude in schools to pay for anything other than the bare necessities. The statutory obligations on a school have to be paid for first. It also worries me that sometimes there is a reluctance to statement pupils; if a pupil is statemented, that pupil...
is rightly required to have additional assistance. However, a school might drag its feet in that scenario because it does not wish to be obliged to provide the extra funding.

I went to a public meeting in my constituency. It is not easy to have rocks thrown at us, but sometimes we need a rock to wake us up. It is hard to admit that schools are struggling. Schools have always been struggling; anyone who has worked in a school will say that the roof has always leaked and the windows are always awful. But there comes a point when things have to be tackled—they cannot be put off any longer. As many Members have said, robbing Peter to pay Paul is not the answer. Taking away from one set of schools to give to another set of schools that are very deserving is not the answer.

An hon. Member earlier talked earlier about the results meaning that we must be doing something right. My schools have excellent results, but that does not mean they do not need the resources. At some point, those results will start to crumble. The curriculum has shrunk down to the core topics, so perhaps those results are already sliding. When I was at school, I was passionate about art. Many young people are not academic but value those topics as much as anything; they inspire young people to go into school, and those teachers may inspire them and know how to deal with the complex needs of some youngsters who have been turned off by education.

We cannot just look at results. Value adding to a pupil means that pupil may have benefited far more from being taught in a good school than another pupil who is academically high achieving. I simply cannot accept that by looking at a set of results we can judge how well our schools are doing. We must ensure that every pupil is making the best of whatever they have to offer.

I accept that more money has gone into the system. We can all talk about how much extra there is, but Sian Kilpatrick of Bernards Heath Primary School told me that she had to write to parents to explain why she had to divert money from teaching their pupils. She spoke from her experience as a teacher who mentored me when I first entered the profession, and how I was able to develop my teaching practice as a result. I agree with both my hon. Friend and the hon. Lady that that is now going, which is a tragedy.

Laura Smith: My hon. Friend raises the point I forgot when I intervened on the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main). I remember how much respect I had for the teachers who mentored me when I first entered the profession, and how I was able to develop my teaching practice as a result. I agree with both my hon. Friend and the hon. Lady that that is now going, which is a tragedy.

Kerry McCarthy: We absolutely want a balance of newer and more experienced teachers in schools. However, it has been raised with me that schools have to pay the apprenticeship levy, which is about £10,000 per school, but they do not want to take on apprentices. That money could be spent on a teaching assistant. Schools do not need apprentices. That is a very quick way in which the Minister could help schools.

In the limited time I have left, I want to focus on SEND. Since 2010, Bristol City Council has lost more than 40% of the funding it gets from the Government, and funds for early intervention have stopped being ring-fenced. That means the council’s high-needs budget has been in deficit for some time, and it has had to raid the mainstream education budget to compensate. Over the past few years, the number of SEND pupils in Bristol has risen three times faster than SEND funding. Obviously, that has an impact. It means children with SEND are often diagnosed later, and that they miss out on early intervention during their first years at school. Early intervention is crucial for ensuring that a child thrives and often prevents problems from developing into something more serious. Services such as CAMHS and speech and language therapy, which have supported schools, have also been cut. That is leading to a crisis. If we do not have early intervention and cannot support children at an early stage, they will develop far more serious problems as they become older.

I am involved in a project called Feeding Bristol, which aims to eradicate food poverty in the city. There is also a very good school food project, which looks
particularly at holiday hunger, breakfast clubs and so on. It is not just a case of getting food to children. We can get donated food for breakfast clubs and holiday hunger schemes from excellent projects such as FareShare, but schools need to be able to afford the staff. That little bit of extra money that schools cannot come up with makes the difference—it means children do not have to start the school day hungry or go through the long school holidays hungry. This is about so much more than just providing education. We need to look at the whole picture. If we are to produce well-rounded, physically and mentally healthy children, which is what we should be doing, we need to be able to support them outside school as well as in school.

6.33 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The word “crisis” is overused in this place, for certain, but it feels very much as though the situation with school resources is a crisis. However, it is a crisis largely in disguise, for two reasons. First, headteachers and the profession as a whole are loth to get involved in what they consider to be politics, or in any way to use the children they serve and teach as pawns in a political debate. Secondly, headteachers do not want to speak about the situation quite so much, simply because, understandably, they fear competitive disadvantage.

Thelma Walker: I am sorry, but the fact that 1,000 headteachers marched on Downing Street last year is symbolic of their frustration at the point we have reached.

Tim Farron: And it really takes that. I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her remark, which of course comes from her experience. As I said, the other reason this issue has not been spoken about as much as it might have been in another part of the public sphere is simply fear of competitive disadvantage. If a headteacher talks about having to lose teaching assistants, the children who would have come to their school might go to another school instead. People therefore keep quiet and suffer in silence.

However, as the hon. Lady rightly says, we have got to a breaking point—a point of immense frustration, which has led headteachers, who would normally dutifully have got on with the job, to speak out very clearly. Just this week, 16 headteachers in my constituency, representing primary schools, special educational needs schools and secondary schools, clubbed together to write to parents and others in our community to be explicit about what the cuts mean for them. That is a brave and unprecedented thing to do. They deserve our taking notice, and they deserve the Government’s taking notice. We must listen.

Those headteachers note that in my constituency alone, there has been a £2.4 million real-terms cut in schools funding, even allowing for the fact that, as a rural area, we are a net beneficiary of the fairer funding formula. The net impact on us has been £2.4 million of cuts—£190 per child has been lost from schools funding in Westmorland and Lonsdale. Headteachers in my community talk explicitly about losing teaching posts—indeed, about making some teachers redundant—and getting rid of teaching assistants. They talk about having smaller establishments, meaning the merging of classes and reductions in the options available, particularly at secondary school. Any country’s greatest asset is its people, especially its young people, so to underfund our schools in this way—to undervalue our greatest asset—is not just cruel but incredibly stupid. Investment in our education is an investment in our country’s future.

Teachers are committed professionals. They do what they do not for the money—there isn’t a right lot of it in the profession—but because they are passionate about making a difference in our young people’s lives, so it breaks their heart to see the impact of these cuts on the quality of education. They also see cuts that affect children in other parts of the public sphere. In Cumbria, because of a cut in public health funding, all school nurses have been abolished. Only 75p per child is spent on preventive mental healthcare across our area. Three years after it was promised, there is still no specialist one-to-one eating disorder service for young people in our community. Just before Christmas, £500,000 was sneaked out of public health spending. That affects the community as a whole, but particularly our young people.

Nowhere are cuts in schools funding more noticeable, though, than in special educational needs. Of course, the first 11 hours of special educational needs provision are paid for by the school. One small high school in my constituency with fewer than 50 pupils spends £105,000 a year on supporting those children. That comes from its main school budget. We penalise schools that do the right thing and advantage those that do not. Will the Minister fund special educational needs directly, rather than damaging schools?

I will give the last word to a highly respected headteacher in my constituency, who wrote to me just yesterday:

“In the last two years we have made reductions to teaching and support staffing, with no reduction in the overall workload. All we get is hackneyed and frankly quite pathetic suggestions from the DFE on how to economise…I love my job, but…I do not wish to be head of a school in a state system that is en route to economic meltdown.”

This Government are demoralising our teachers and letting down our children. That must change.

6.38 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank everyone for their contributions, which I found incredibly powerful. We hear so much about the cuts as numbers; it makes such a difference when we hear what they actually mean, so I am going to take the advice of the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) and talk a little about outcomes.

Here are a few outcomes for the Government to ponder. First, 15.93% of children with special educational needs are excluded, compared with 3% of those without such needs. Pupils identified with special educational needs accounted for around half—46%—of all permanent exclusions and 44% of fixed-period exclusions. Pupils who have an EHCP statement are five times more likely to be permanently excluded than those without SEN. Pupils on SEN support are six times more likely to be excluded than those without SEN.

I have a few more outcomes for the Government to hear about. The latest school workforce statistics show that in England schools have 137,000 more pupils, but 5,400 fewer teachers, 2,800 fewer teaching assistants, 1,400 fewer support staff and 1,200 fewer auxiliary staff. Students are also being taught by less experienced staff.
According to Unison, 70% of teaching staff were doing work previously done by higher-grade staff and half of those doing the extra work were not trained to do it.

Another outcome is that fewer support staff mean that support staff make up half the school workforce and are the lowest paid in the public sector. Since 2013, despite the increase in numbers, there has been a 12% cut in the number of science technicians and a 10% cut in the number of teaching assistants in secondary schools. What does that mean? It means there is less support for our children with special educational needs, who desperately need it.

I am not suggesting for one moment that schools or teachers have suddenly become cruel and that that is why exclusions for children with special needs are rocketing, although I have mentioned to the Minister on numerous occasions that he needs to look again at his school accountability measures. However, the simple fact is that children with special educational needs and disabilities are expensive to teach. It has already been mentioned that schools are welcoming it when older, more experienced teachers leave, because that can save money; it is not difficult to conclude that some schools may also welcome it when an expensive child with special educational needs is leaving—or the school may choose to develop ways to encourage the parents to send that child to the school down the road, rather than to their school. They know that they simply do not have the money needed to give that child the education they need.

The Minister will be pleased that, as a good Methodist, I will not for one moment suggest gambling or placing a bet with him, but the comment made by the Minister for Academies—that he would bet schools “a bottle of champagne” that he could find them savings—was a real slap in the face for many headteachers. In my quest to be helpful, I have a few suggestions for the Minister about how he could save money.

First, £4.3 million has been spent on the troops to teachers programme, which so far has resulted in 69 teachers and apparently has £10 million waiting to be spent. LocatED has been set up to acquire land and buildings across England, as part of plans set out in the spring Budget to build 500 new free schools by 2020, and it has a budget of £2 billion. The regional schools commissioners programme originally had £4 million spent on it in 2014, but that has now risen to £31 million. The Department for Education spent £833 million on 175 sites for free schools. Twenty-four of those sites cost £10 million, and four of them cost £30 million.

6.42 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I shall keep my remarks brief because there are Members who still want to speak.

As the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson)—a friend in this respect—said, we spent Saturday morning being assailed by governors and headteachers in Gloucestershire. It was a salutary experience, if not a harrowing one, because the message, which we have heard loud and clear from everyone here, is that it is very difficult out there at the moment. Most Members, if not all, would agree that it is more difficult than it was previously.

We had our own debate about Gloucestershire on 30 January, which the Minister responded to. I will not rehearse the same arguments now, but I will give him some specific ideas that came from Saturday’s meeting, which the Government could do fairly quickly. It was unanimously agreed that two things would help special needs across the board, at both mainstream and special schools. First, the additional needs budget should be ring-fenced, because schools feel that too often it does not reach the areas that it should. It is important that it reaches the schools that need it.

Secondly, there is the issue with the £6,000 for the education, health and care plan. That is a perverse incentive. As is happening in Gloucestershire, it means that there is a huge rise in the number of children being taken out of school to be home educated, as well as in the number of exclusions. Sadly, in the south-west we are now top of the tree, which is unusual as we have usually been in the average range.

I contend that those two issues have arisen because we are not getting quick enough diagnoses, which would make parents confident that their children were getting the support that they needed. Can the Minister make some noises? Clearly, this is about talking to the Treasury, but it is a specific funding request—not just about more money in education. It could be targeted in the way that we were led to believe would make a dramatic overnight difference to schools in Gloucestershire. A lot of their deficits have begun to arise from that.

I hope the Minister will respond to that, think about it, and go out and try to allay some of the fears of those schools. Schools do not believe that there is an understanding of how bad things have become. All schools—even grammar schools, dare I say it—stand to gain if there is clarity over how the SEN funding mechanism could be targeted at children who need it, and quickly. Then we could deal with some of the other, wider problems.

6.45 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), who made some excellent points, and I congratulate her on this debate. I declare an interest as vice-president of the Local Government Association. I hope the Minister will respond to that, think about it, and try to assuage some of the fears.

Prior to this debate, I received messages from parents, teachers and staff at schools in my constituency, who are rightly concerned. We know the statistics, even if the Government often seem unwilling to accept them. The Institute for Fiscal Studies showed that school funding is down by £1.7 billion in real terms since 2014-15, while one in four primaries and one in six secondary schools have had their funding cut in cash terms this year.

According to the National Education Union, in my constituency the per-pupil funding between 2015 and 2018 dropped by £347. When we discuss the numbers and the scale of cuts, we must remember the impact on staffing and resources and what that means in practice for our schools and our children. Last week, I met the headteacher of a school in my constituency who was worried about the cuts she was being forced to make, and the impact it would have on the children she and other staff members were trying to support, especially those with additional needs who were awaiting assessments or specialist provision.

A headteacher of another local primary school contacted me about the £1 million deficit the school is facing as a result of increased costs to schools, uplifts in pension
contributions and the planned fair funding formula. The school is about to cut six teaching assistants who currently support SEN children and it will need to make further reductions to try and prepare for a 9.3% cut in overall funding.

Meanwhile, a year 5 teacher wrote to me following an hour-and-a-half stock audit at his school, which was done to limit the stock they use. For example, six glue sticks were to be used per half term. The teacher is worried about what happens next and the headteachers told me they were unsure how they will manage to maintain their currently good provision. Does the Minister have any answers? What does he say to the children and their parents at the 10 schools in Birmingham that now close at lunchtime on Fridays because they cannot afford to stay open for longer?

Constituents and school staff have contacted me about this debate. They are not asking for more money to support children, but they are increasingly asking for the savage cuts to be less vicious, and asking whether the cuts can be graduated to try and minimise the negative impact they are having—and will have—on children and young people. Let me be clear: I am asking for more money.

As a mother with two children at school, I think this is a shocking state of affairs and a situation of which the Government should be thoroughly ashamed. The Government have cut funding while expecting schools to do more. Schools are meant to manage the increasingly complex needs of children with mental health problems, special educational needs and disabilities. The LGA estimates that councils are facing a high-needs funding shortfall of £472 million in the 2018-19 financial year and that the funding gap could rise to £1.6 billion by 2021.

With schools close to breaking point, having already cut resources, staff and opening hours, how are they meant to support children and young people with complex needs? The Children’s Commissioner said that the Government’s plans required quadrupling funding to ensure there are no gaps and black holes for children who need support with their mental health. Does the Minister agree that in order to invest in prevention as well as treatment of symptoms, schools must be sufficiently resourced? Can he tell us what steps are being taken to achieve that?

6.49 pm

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): I thank all the Members who have taken part in the debate and the more than 100,000 people who signed the petition. Last year, I surveyed more than 30 schools from across my constituency to try to understand the scale and impact of Government cuts to our children’s education. I was shocked to learn that since 2015 more than 80% of schools in my constituency have been forced to cut basic educational provision such as books, equipment and teacher training. The same number reported that they have had to make staffing cuts owing to funding pressures. Most damningly, every one of the schools surveyed in my constituency reported that they were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their current levels of funding.

Despite the best efforts of our hard-working school leaders to protect pupils from cuts, it is becoming more and more difficult. We know all too well by now that cuts to schools hit the poorest children the hardest. Current levels of funding risk robbing a generation of working-class children of their future. A primary school headteacher in my constituency recently got in touch to raise a number of concerns that illustrate the crisis in schools well. That headteacher represents a school in one of the most deprived parts of my constituency. Despite that, the school achieves excellent results, coming in the top 2% of schools for progress in maths and the top 5% for English.

The headteacher told me that the school achieved those results by working closely with families to support their needs, and by trying to ensure that the children have the resources they need to thrive and achieve. They believe that through support to the whole family children are given the best possible life chances, but she told me:

“I have built a strong, highly skilled and highly effective team to do this—families tell us how much they value the work we do. However, under the current climate of worsening school budgets this service is threatened. I am facing over the next few years a deficit budget. What do I cut? I know that the services we offer make a real difference to our children, but within a couple of years I will struggle to fund the very basics required to educate our children”.

How can the Minister justify putting hard-working educators in such a position?

As that example makes clear, schools with the potential to achieve the very best results are being held back by insufficient budgets. It is a scandal, actively undermining the hard work and progress made by schools in my constituency. Many other local primary schools recently wrote to me expressing similar concerns.

Next week, the Chancellor will issue his spring statement. That is an opportunity for the Government to listen to the concerns of teachers and parents across the country and substantially increase funding for schools. I call on the Government to put an end to their unsustainable programme of education cuts—a programme that is placing an intolerable burden on the future of the country. If the Government are serious about the future direction of our country post Brexit, they must start seriously investing in those who stand to inherit it.

6.53 pm

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): It is a privilege to take part in this debate and to listen to my colleagues’ fantastic contributions. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) for introducing the debate, but I particularly thank the petitioners, without whom we would not be able to have it. It is a matter of regret that the Government have not seen fit to allow us time to debate the issue in the Chamber. Were it not for the fact that the petition was signed by so many people, we would not even be here today to discuss it now.

The message is crystal clear. I met chairs of governors in my constituency on Friday and I visit schools all the time. I have been a governor at several schools in my constituency. I went to school there and my children go to the same comprehensive school that I went to. I feel I have got to know many of the people who work in schools in Darlington well over the years. I went to school with someone who is now one of the headteachers, which makes me feel a bit old, I must say. I have never known the unhappiness among leaders in schools to be so great. I remember being a governor between 2002 and 2008, and there was sense of shared mission in the
must be absolutely clear: it is deliberate policy. Conservative current funding crisis by chance or happenstance, we straying from my script, I must say that when Government number that need to be addressed. Although I am will take note of this terrible injustice, which is one of a sitting on the window ledges. I hope that the Government hon. Members have made this afternoon. The last time debate. I do not want to repeat arguments that other and parents—who have encouraged me to speak in the constituency—headteachers, teachers, support staff and indeed the petitioners for initiating this debate. my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) cogent speech, which I completely agree with. I also thank (Jenny Chapman) for delivering such a powerful and thank my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington calling me in this important debate, Sir Christopher. I decouple what is going wrong and intervene to put it right for schools in Darlington? It is not working. Whatever is going wrong needs to be identified and put right. My headteachers are not a belligerent, ideological bunch. I am going to end with a quotation from one of them, Pete King at Mowden School: “School leaders have previously tried to shield parents from the difficulty but because the situation is not sustainable, we now need parents to know. There simply are not the savings to be made that can make up for the huge shortfall in our funding, and it feels very unfair to our children and our staff.” That is the message that is coming from everybody. Government Members may have been very polite about it, but it is the same message. Something is going badly wrong. The results that are wanted may be possible today, but, as the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) said, I seriously doubt that they will be achieved in five, six or 10 years’ time unless we put things right. I said, I seriously doubt that they will be achieved in five, six or 10 years’ time unless we put things right.

6.57 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): Thank you for calling me in this important debate, Sir Christopher. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) for delivering such a powerful and cogent speech, which I completely agree with. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) and indeed the petitioners for initiating this debate.

Like many Members, I have been contacted by a lot of constituents—headteachers, teachers, support staff and parents—who have encouraged me to speak in the debate. I do not want to repeat arguments that other hon. Members have made this afternoon. The last time I was in this Chamber and it was so busy, it was during the debate on state pension inequality. Members were sitting on the window ledges. I hope that the Government will take note of this terrible injustice, which is one of a number that need to be addressed. Although I am straying from my script, I must say that when Government Members suggest that somehow we have arrived at the current funding crisis by chance or happenstance, we must be absolutely clear: it is deliberate policy. Conservative Members have gone through the Lobby to vote for austerity and cuts in school budgets—effectively, in real terms—and this is the consequence. It is not an accident but deliberate policy, and it is in our gift to do something about it.

I am really disappointed that the promises made that all schools would have a modest increase in funding have not been delivered. When the truth is stretched thin enough, people start to see through it. Other Members have quoted lots of data about the number of schools that have not had a real-terms cash increase. Out of 243 schools in County Durham, 194 will face cuts and some will have very modest increases. Easington is not classed as an urban area, but it is a very deprived area, with large numbers of people facing all sorts of problems; I was at the opening of an extension to our food bank on Saturday. There is an argument that areas facing such challenges should be better resourced. I am not suggesting we should take money away from the affluent south, but I am suggesting that we should recognise that there is a cost, that needs should be met and that we must provide the necessary resources.

Class sizes in County Durham have gone up, as they have elsewhere. The local education authority has lost an astonishing £8.2 million between 2015 and 2020, which equates to a loss of £133 per pupil. In Durham, as elsewhere, budgets have been cut. Education is an investment in the future prosperity of our nation, and I urge Ministers to consider very carefully the points that have been put.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): The hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) has kindly agreed to forgo some of the time for his winding-up speech to allow time for the next speaker.

7 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher.

When I came into this House, schools in York were the seventh worst funded in the country. However, we then proceeded to fall to the very worst-funded schools, and there have been serious consequences. My fear is that the lack of investment now will run through this generation of children as they prepare for later life. We know how much stress and strain children and schools are under at the moment. We have a broken system and we are breaking our children with the stress and strain we are putting not only on them, but on teachers. Colleagues of the Minister are piling more and more responsibilities on to teachers, such as dealing with mental health issues, because our child and adolescent mental health services are seriously broken too.

While we are talking about the amount of money that the schools are being allocated, we must remember the additional costs of pensions and national insurance, and the increasing amount of funding that they have to find for other things. In York, we have had the fourth biggest fall in staff numbers in our primary schools and the largest rise in class sizes in our secondary schools—significantly more than any other area. When I look at where the cuts have fallen in our city—the worst-funded in the country—they have fallen on the schools in the most deprived areas; Tang Hall Primary School will lose £559 per pupil.
[Rachael Maskell]

There is a correlation with the consequences that that will create, but I also draw attention to the impact it is already having in terms of the attainment gap. As well as being worst funded, York also has the largest attainment gap in the country, at 31%. Three out of five children from disadvantaged backgrounds are not school-ready by the age of five, and that follows through in their schooling: 26% have an attainment gap at the age of 11. Only 40% of disadvantaged children reach expected standards in reading, writing and maths, and that figure has been static. As that moves through to secondary school, we see high absenteeism for children on free school meals, at 44%, so we know there is a correlation between attainment, funding, class sizes and attendance.

I ask the Minister to look at this issue and to see the consequences that are being built as a result of the cuts placed on our schools. Perhaps he could look again at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s report on the postcode lottery in schools, and its suggestion of an early excellence fund. We know the difference it makes when we fund early years, whether through Sure Start or through putting money on the table. We know the difference it makes when we fund lotteries in schools, and its suggestion of an early excellence fund. We know the difference it makes when we fund these kinds of initiatives. We know the difference it makes when we fund these kinds of initiatives.

I will touch on capital funding, because we have some serious issues in our school buildings. Tang Hall Primary School was 90 years old last November; it is so cold in the winter that the children have to wear hoodies just to keep warm, and their hands are so cold as they sit in those classrooms, yet they are boiling in summer. They need a new school. Tang Hall was top of the Building Schools for the Future list in 2010 and there is still no sign of a new school. Carr Junior School has water ingress and needs repairs, and St Wilfrid’s RC Primary School needs green space for its children. We have too many children trying to squeeze into schools. The spring statement is coming up; we need the funding now.

Wera Hobhouse: On a point of order, Chair, I failed to declare when I spoke earlier that I am a trustee of a local academy trust, the Palladian Academy Trust. I apologise for the omission.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): That passes.

Mr Ramanandi, Mr Malik and others who have been involved in the campaign are here today. Their efforts have ensured that cuts to school funding are being debated in this place again, and I commend them for their work. Is it not ironic that the headteacher of a school named for St Joseph, the patron saint of workers, will have to go back to Gateshead tomorrow to start consulting on redundancies to make people unemployed?

This has been a fascinating debate. Normal practice as shadow spokesman is to thank all the hon. Members on my side for the excellent speeches they gave today—“You did really well, well done everybody”—but that is not what I am going to do. I want to highlight a few hon. Members on the Government side who spoke today. It seems that nearly every MP from West Sussex is in the room: the hon. Members for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and for Crawley (Henry Smith), the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), and the Minister himself—

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): And Worthing West.

Mike Kane: Forgive me; the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), too. We know that that authority is having to cut—let me get my figures accurate—£8.9 million from the schools in their patches between 2015 and 2020. The hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith) spoke well about Southampton losing £4.9 million over the same period. The hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), my footballing partner, spoke of Suffolk losing £7.8 million over that period.

The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) spoke passionately about his schools in Stockport. Stockport, my neighbouring authority, is losing £6.4 million and a special school in Stockport has said just this week that it will have to cut Friday afternoons from its curriculum. The hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), who like my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) represents Gloucestershire, spoke of cuts of £11.1 million. The hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) spoke about Essex—I was at St Dominic’s just the other week, and what a fantastic school it is—and the £29.8 million cuts faced there. Finally, there was a really powerful speech from the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main), speaking about Hertfordshire having to cut £33.2 million from the budget. I will end my speech with what she said about the cake.

We can be in no doubt after what we have heard today about the impact of continued Government austerity on education. In fact, it is not austerity anymore; the Secretary of State has already said he wants to reduce spending on education and that he thinks it is too high. The policy is ideologically motivated. Education urgently needs investment across the board, and the Government must finally begin reversing the devastating cuts. Just look at how many right hon. and hon. Members have turned out today.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Education Secretary have both stated in the House of Commons that every school in England would see a cash-terms increase in its funding, but that flies in the face of the reality we have heard about today, what parents and teachers are telling us and what is happening on the ground. The Institute of Fiscal Studies has stated that it is simply not accurate, and the UK Statistics Authority has even rebuked the Education Secretary for his statistical inaccuracy. There has been a concerted effort by the Secretary of State and the Minister to fudge the figures and to deflect attention away from the school funding
Our more rigorous primary school curriculum—on a par with the highest performing in the world—has been taught since September 2014. Since it was first tested in 2016, the proportion of primary school pupils reaching the expected standard in maths has risen from 70% to 76% in 2018, and in reading from 66% to 75%.

Our primary school children have achieved their highest ever scores on international reading tests. When we introduced a phonics check in 2012, just 58% of six-year-olds taking it reached the expected standard. That figure is now 82%. More children are now on track to read more effectively than when we came into office in 2010. The attainment gap in the primary phase between the most disadvantaged pupils and their peers, as measured by the attainment gap index, has narrowed by 13.2% since 2011. In secondary schools, our more rigorous academic curriculum and qualifications support social mobility by giving disadvantaged children the knowledge they need to have the same career and life opportunities as their peers. I thank the 452,000 teachers—10,000 more than in 2010—who have delivered these higher standards in our schools. I also thank the 263,000 teaching assistants, of which there are 49,000 more than in 2011, and the 263,000 support staff, of which there are 129,000 more than in 2011.

To support these improvements, the Government have prioritised school spending while having to take difficult decisions in other areas of public spending. We have been enabled to do that by our balanced approach to the public finances and to our stewardship of the economy, reducing the unsustainable annual deficit of £150 billion, which was 10% of GDP in 2010, but 2% in 2018. The economic stability that that provided has resulted in employment rising to a record 32.6 million and unemployment being at its lowest level since the 1970s, giving young people leaving school more opportunities to have jobs and start their careers.1

That balanced approach allows us to invest in public services across Government. Core funding for schools and high needs will rise from almost £41 billion in 2017-18 to £43.5 billion in 2019-20. That includes an extra £1.3 billion for schools and high needs, announced in 2017, that we invested across 2018-19 and 2019-20, over and above plans set out in the spending review.

Since 2010, 825,000 new school places have been created in our schools. One of the first decisions we took on coming to office in 2010 was to double basic-need capital spending, reversing the cuts of 100,000 school places that we saw under the last Labour Government.

Mrs Main: Will the Minister give way?

Nick Gibb: Not right now, if my hon. Friend will forgive me. I want to make sure that I respond to the points from as many hon. Members as I can.

Figures from the Institute for Fiscal Studies show that real-terms per-pupil funding for five to 16-year-olds in 2020 will be more than 50% higher than in 2000. We compare favourably with other countries. The UK spends as much per pupil on primary and secondary state education as any country in the G7 apart from America—a point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert).

While more money is going into our schools than ever before, we recognise the budgeting challenges that schools face as we ask them to achieve more for children...

and to absorb cost increases, such as employer’s national insurance and higher pension contributions to teachers’ pension funds, that have arisen as a result of our determination to bear down on the unsustainable deficit. That means that it is essential to do all we can to help schools make the most of every pound.

In addition to providing additional funding for schools, we changed the way funding is distributed, to make the system fairer. Last April, we started to distribute funding through the national funding formula, with each area’s allocation taking into account the individual needs and characteristics of its schools. That replaced the unfair and outdated previous system, under which schools with similar characteristics received very different levels of funding, with little or no justification. These disparities existed for far too long, as my right hon. and hon. Friends from West Sussex pointed out, leaving some schools trying to achieve with fewer resources the same as other, better-funded schools in similar situations. That is why we committed to reform the system, and I am proud to say that our introduction of the national funding formula delivers that commitment.

Schools are already benefiting from the gains delivered by the national funding formula. Since 2017, we have given every local authority more money for every pupil in every school, while allocating the biggest increases to the schools that have been most underfunded. By 2019-20, all schools will attract an increase of at least 1% per pupil, compared with their 2017-18 baselines. The most underfunded schools will attract up to 6% more per pupil by 2019-20, compared with 2017-18.

The hon. Member for Blaydon will be aware that funding for schools in her constituency has risen from £52.6 million in 2017-18 to £54.9 million in 2019-20—a 4.5% increase in cash terms. In Blaydon, per-pupil funding has risen from £4,468 per pupil in 2017-18 to £4,635 in 2019-20, which is a 3.7% increase over that period.

The hon. Lady cited a figure from the School Cuts website, which incidentally has been criticised by the UK Statistics Authority. It said:

“We believe the headline statement”,

which the hon. Lady cited in this debate,

“that 91% of schools face funding cuts’ risks giving a misleading impression of future changes in school budgets. The method of calculation may also give a misleading impression of the scale of change for some particular schools.”

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) made important points about the historical inequities in Shoreham (Tim Loughton) made important points about change for some particular schools."

Mr Wragg: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Nick Gibb: I will not give way just now.

The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) should be aware that, in her constituency, funding has risen from £435.9 million in 2017-18 to £530.6 million in 2019-20. That is an increase of 10.3% overall and of 9.5% on a per-pupil basis. The hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor)—

Laura Smith: Will the Minister give way?

Nick Gibb: I will not give way just now.

The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) should be aware that, in her constituency, funding has risen from £435.9 million in 2017-18 to £530.6 million in 2019-20. That is an increase of 10.3% overall and of 9.5% on a per-pupil basis. The hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor)—

Mr Wragg: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Nick Gibb: I will not for the moment, if my hon. Friend will forgive me. I want to respond to the very serious points made by hon. Members during the debate. If there is time at the end of that, I will of course give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), who always has important issues to raise. I am always very cognisant of his expertise as a former teacher and as a member of the Select Committee on Education.

The hon. Member for Edmonton should be aware that funding for schools in her constituency has risen from £89.2 million in 2017-18 to £91.3 million. That is an increase of £2.2 million. It is an increase of 2.5% overall and of 3% on a per-pupil basis.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove asked about funding for the increase in the employer contribution to teachers’ pensions. That will rise to 23.6%, so 23.6% of the salary will be paid by the employer into the teacher pension scheme. We propose to provide funding to meet the additional teachers’ pension scheme pressures in 2019-20 for maintained schools, academies and FE colleges whose staff are part of the teachers’ pension scheme. That proposal includes centrally employed teachers and teachers at music education hubs. We have recently closed a public consultation on the proposal. We will now assess the replies and publish a formal response alongside announcing funding in due course.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith) made similar points about taking a serious approach to the debate. He would acknowledge that in Southampton, Itchen funding has increased from £60 million in 2017-18 to £62 million in 2019-20. That is an increase of 3.3%, and 2.3% on a per-pupil basis.

The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) should be aware that funding in her constituency has risen from £44.2 million in 2017-18 to £47.68 million in 2019-20. That is an increase of 7.6% and of 6.3% on a per-pupil basis. The hon. Member for Bury North (James Frith) should be aware that funding in his constituency has risen from £61 million in 2017-18 to £64.8 million in 2019-20. That is an increase of £3.8 million or 6.2%, and of 4.7% on a per-pupil basis.

My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) will be aware of course—he always is on these issues—that, in his constituency, schools are being funded to the tune of £72.7 million in 2017-18 and that that is rising to £76.4 million. That is an increase of 5.1% and of 3.1% on a per-pupil basis. He raised the issue of FE.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. It is disgraceful that there are Members sitting in this Chamber who are not listening to the Minister. They have taken advantage of participating in a debate and they are ---[Interruption.]

1.[Official Report, 21 March 2019, Vol. 656, c. 10MC.]
setting a very bad example to people up and down the country who believe that this should be a democracy in which people are able to listen to the arguments. The Minister is on his feet, and I order people not to interrupt any more.

Nick Gibb: Thank you very much, Sir Christopher.

My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester raised the issue of FE funding. We have protected the base rate of funding for 16 to 19-year-olds until 2020 at £4,000 per pupil and we continue to provide extra funding to add to that base rate; an example is the £500 million of funding for T-levels.¹ We plan to invest nearly £7 billion during the current academic year. However, we are aware of the financial pressures on school sixth forms and other providers of education for 16 to 19-year-olds and will continue to look carefully at funding for that age group in preparation for the spending review.

I point out to the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) that in her constituency we are spending £82.3 million in 2017-18 and that is rising to £85.4 million in 2019-20. That is an increase of 3.8% and of 2.5% on a per-pupil basis. I could not miss out the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) of course. Funding in her constituency is rising from £42.9 million in 2017-18 to £46.2 million in 2019-20. That is an increase of 7.9% and of 4% on a per-pupil basis.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crawley raised the important issue of special needs education. When we state our commitment to supporting every child to succeed, it is important to be clear that that applies, without reservation, to children with special educational needs and disabilities. That is why we have reformed the funding system to take particular account of children and young people with additional needs, and introduced a new formula. We recognise the concerns that have been raised about the costs of making provision for children and young people with complex special educational needs. We have increased overall funding allocations to local authorities for high needs year on year. We have also recently announced that we will provide £250 million of additional funding for high needs across England over this financial year and the next. High-needs funding is now over £6 billion, having risen by £1 billion since 2013.

We have also announced other measures to do with capital: a £100 million top-up to the special provision capital fund for local authorities in 2019-20 for new places and improved facilities.

Of course, we recognise that schools have faced cost pressures in recent years. That is why we have announced a strategy setting out the support, current and planned, that we will provide to help schools to make savings on the £10 billion of non-staffing spend across England. It provides schools with practical advice about identifying potential savings that they can put back into teaching. That includes deals to help schools to save money on the products and services that they buy. Schools spend £75 million on advertising their vacancies, so we are also launching a free teacher vacancy listing website to help schools to recruit excellent teachers and drive down recruitment costs. We have created a benchmarking website for schools that allows them to compare their own spending with that of similar schools elsewhere in the country. That will help them to identify whether and where changes can be made to direct more resources into high-quality teaching.

To give the hon. Member for Blaydon time to wind up the debate, I will finally just thank hon. Members for their contributions to this important debate. We are determined to have a world-class education system that allows every child to achieve their potential, regardless of who they are or where they live.

7.28 pm

Liz Twist: I am not entirely sure what to say in the two minutes that remain. I am really disappointed with the Minister’s response, because he is saying to headteachers such as Mr Ramanandi and others that their experience is not valid. That is not what we are all finding. It is not just the headteachers; all of us in the Chamber, from every party, have made the point that we know that schools in our area need additional funding. The whole point of this debate was to ensure that that issue was raised, so I am sorry that the Minister appears not to have addressed it. I hope very much that he will think again, and I hope that he will have a day in the north-east, as I invited him to do, and visit Mr Ramanandi’s school and others in Gateshead, and perhaps visit Darlington at the same time, to see what is going on. Headteachers are telling us that they have real difficulty in making their budgets balance, and I for one understand where they are coming from. I hope that the Minister will think very hard and push for additional resources in the comprehensive spending review.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 232220 relating to school funding.

7.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

¹ [Official Report, 21 March 2019, Vol. 656, c. 10MC.]
Westminster Hall
Tuesday 5 March 2019

[Geraint Davies in the Chair]

Catholic Sixth-form Colleges

9.30 am

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of Catholic sixth-form colleges.

It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and at the outset of this debate I thank the Backbench Business Committee for selecting it.

Catholic sixth-form colleges face double discrimination under the Government’s funding of post-16 education: they are not academies, so they receive less funding than colleges that have converted to become academies, but even if they wanted to become academies they cannot do so.

The Government have been aware of these problems for a number of years, but they have done little to address either concern. On top of the huge cuts in funding to post-16 education since 2010, this double discrimination is raising concerns within the Catholic community about the long-term future of all 14 Catholic sixth-form colleges in England.

Unlike Catholic schools, the religious character of Catholic sixth-form colleges is not protected in statute, so the trustees of Catholic sixth-form colleges such as the nationally renowned St Dominic’s in my constituency, even if they were huge fans of academising, could not switch their college to make it an academy and take advantage of the many financial inducements that such status might allow.

St Dominic’s has an impressive history. It was established 140 years ago, in 1879, as a school. When the London borough of Harrow reorganised its education system, creating a specific sixth-form sector, the Dominican nuns agreed to transfer the school grounds to the Diocese of Westminster as the site of a new Catholic sixth-form college.

St Dominic’s Sixth Form College opened its doors to its first 289 students—boys and girls—in September 1979. With more than 1,300 students, it attracts young men and women from a wide geographical area across north-west London, with a number travelling more than 15 miles a day to study for their level 3 qualifications. It is a great Catholic college, but it exists within a multi-faith and multi-cultural setting that reflects our very diverse local community in Harrow.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman wanted to add at this point the enormous concentration that that college and other Catholic sixth-form colleges have shown in relation to social justice. That has been a strong element of what those colleges teach and the way that they teach it.

Gareth Thomas: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to take the opportunity to praise the contribution of Catholic sixth-form colleges in teaching about social justice. I do not know whether that is part of the reason that I keep getting elected. [Laughter.] Certainly, though, Catholic sixth-form colleges deserve his praise for their teaching about social justice.

The staff at St Dominic’s, to whom the hon. Gentleman was perhaps also alluding, are some of the best in the business. They are experts in their field who have devoted their careers to the education of post-16 students. They teach at a very high level, which in turn enables the students to get excellent results.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a great case for that specific sixth-form college, but I understand that 85% of these Catholic sixth-form colleges are rated “outstanding” or “good” by Ofsted, so clearly there is excellent teaching going on across all of them.

Gareth Thomas: I should not have allowed the hon. Gentleman to intervene, because he has stolen a line from later in my speech, but he makes a good point and I will return to it later.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I apologise to the hon. Gentleman for being unable to stay and make a speech in this debate—I have a meeting with a Minister—but I want to make this point. Does he agree that, given the fact that schools are increasingly becoming secularised, parents must have the option to have their child educated with faith as a cornerstone and to have an input into spiritual teaching, and that the Government cannot and must not ignore this point but instead must take it into consideration when allocating funding? Spiritual education is so important in this day and age.

Gareth Thomas: I recognise the continuing and strong support for spiritual education, and it continues to be a striking feature of many of our communities that there is strong support for faith schools. In the context of the debate, there is strong support for this Catholic sixth-form college, which inspired me to seek Backbench Business Committee approval for this debate, and I am sure that there is also strong support for the other Catholic sixth-form colleges across the country. The hon. Gentleman makes a good point.

Jim Shannon: To re-emphasise that point, when it comes to parents seeking a school for their children to go to, it is so important that they have a choice between secular teaching and faith-based teaching. When it comes to funding and assistance, we obviously look to the Minister for some support, but it is important that people have that choice and that that choice is available in Members’ own constituencies as well.

Gareth Thomas: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about choice. I suppose the essential point of this debate is to say that there needs to be a level playing field in funding. A child who wants to go to a certain type of school or college should not see that there is better funding for one particular institution than there is for another down the road. I am sure that is a point he will agree with.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. In relation to capital, particularly for colleges and their funding, sometimes Catholic schools have had to amalgamate to release property they can sell to raise...
capital funding. I have come across cases such as that—I do not know whether he has or not—because of the lack of capital funding.

Gareth Thomas: My hon. Friend makes a good point about the lack of capital funding, and access to capital funding is one way in which Catholic sixth-form colleges face the double discrimination that I talked about in my opening remarks. Later in my speech, I will give some detail about the issue of capital.

Until 1993, St Dominic’s Sixth Form College was part of Harrow’s local authority-maintained system, but following the Government’s post-16 reorganisation the college became independent within the state tertiary system, overseen by the Further Education Funding Council for England. That change brought about new challenges and pressures on the college, primarily to increase student numbers and its educational provision, in order to cater for the educational needs in our community.

The 21st century has seen a series of considerable successes for the college, as its reputation for delivering high-quality sixth-form education has continued to spread. By 2007, St Dominic’s Sixth Form College was among the small group of colleges that were awarded beacon status. The 2008 Ofsted inspection of the college judged it “outstanding”, which is a distinction it has held on to ever since. Indeed, the college is now regarded as being at the very top of the league of sixth-form colleges for “excellence” in its educational provision and for its A-level results. In 2017, The Sunday Times specifically recognised it as the best sixth-form college of the year.

Not surprisingly, therefore, St Dominic’s is heavily oversubscribed—typically, there are about 3,000 applications for the 700 places available annually—but in recent years the college has had to expand, in part to meet the financial challenges of a static budgetary settlement. However, with 1,300 students, the college is now full, with no capacity to expand further.

Without an increase in funding per student or additional students, revenue income will remain flat and with increased costs such as pensions, salaries and so on, the risk of further financial challenge becomes very real. The implications of that include the possibility of a reduced curriculum, at a time when the new Ofsted framework requires a rich and diverse curriculum offer, and the possibility of substantially increased teacher-to-student ratios.

The principal of St Dominic’s, the excellent Andrew Parkin, rightly describes his college as an “educational jewel” that is looking increasingly fragile, because there are no significant financial increases on the horizon.

There are 14 Catholic sixth-form colleges in England: Aquinas in Cheshire, Cardinal Newman in Preston, Carmel in St Helens, Christ the King in Lewisham, Holy Cross in Bury, Loreto in Manchester, Notre Dame in Leeds, St Brendan’s in Bristol, St Charles in Kensington, St Francis Xavier in Wandsworth, St John Rigby in Wigan, St Mary’s in Blackburn and Xaverian in Manchester; as well as my own, St Dominic’s. Like the wider sixth-form college sector, those are high-performing institutions, as was mentioned by the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes).

Catholic sixth-form colleges teach just over 27,000 pupils, and employ almost 2,500 teachers and support staff. Together, they educate about 3% of all 16 to 18-year-olds in publicly funded provision. They account for 4% of all A-level students and for 5% of students progressing to higher education, including to the most competitive universities. Some 86% of them, as the hon. Gentleman also mentioned, are rated outstanding or good by Ofsted. They have a justified reputation as centres of excellence and places of academic rigour and achievement. They give students the chance to excel, regardless of their previous academic achievement.

Catholic sixth-form colleges have many things in common, and most serve diverse and often deprived communities.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): My hon. Friend talks about the excellent standard of education in Catholic sixth-form colleges. Does he agree that that is all the more commendable in relation to Carmel College in St Helens—a college of which we are very proud—where more than a third of the cohort is from a disadvantaged background? That high standard of educational excellence means that the college contributes strongly to social mobility in the borough.

Gareth Thomas: My hon. Friend makes a good point about Carmel College, which he knows very well. Catholic sixth-form colleges are generally regarded as a vital catalyst for social mobility in the areas they serve, and many have high levels of progression into further and higher education. Although they maintain a strong Catholic ethos, they are open to students of all faiths and none. Inevitably, many understandably cite their Catholic identity and vision as being key to their success.

I am told that Catholic dioceses across the country are developing multi-academy trusts so as not to suffer needless financial loss and because of the inducements on offer from the Government for conversion to academies. Within that construct, which is not of their choosing, they are, to their credit, trying to lock down school partnership and school-to-school support. Given the wealth of expertise within Catholic sixth-form colleges, one might have thought that the Government would have wanted them to be part of such multi-academy trust arrangements. However, even if the colleges want to join the trusts, they cannot do so at the moment.

The future of Catholic sixth-form colleges and their ongoing excellent performance largely depend on three things: revenue funding, capital funding and, in the worst case, the possibility of conversion to academies. On revenue funding, it is without question that sixth-form funding is in crisis. Two deep cuts to post-16 education funding were made after 2010. The national funding rate, which is by far the biggest component of the government funding formula, has been frozen at £4,000 per student per year since 2013, and funding for 18-year-olds was cut to just £3.300 per student in 2014. Expenditure on 16-to-19 education fell from £6.39 billion in 2010-11 to £5.68 billion in 2017-18—a reduction of more than 11% in cash terms and more than 20% in real terms. In 2018, the Institute for Fiscal Studies estimated that, at 2018-19 prices, spending per full-time equivalent 16-to-19 student in further education fell from just over £6,200 in 2010-11 to £5,698 in 2017-18.
The cuts come against a backdrop of significant increases in running costs in education generally, and in colleges in particular. Since 2010, the Government have imposed a range of new requirements on institutions, which has left much less money for schools and colleges to spend on the frontline education of students, at a time when the needs of young people are becoming increasingly complex.

The future for Catholic sixth-form colleges also depends on changes to capital funding—a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham). A number of institutions are keen to expand but cannot access the necessary funding to educate more students. Others have increased student numbers as a response to funding pressures, but have reached maximum capacity and lack the capital needed to satisfy the demand for places. The absence of a sufficient national capital fund, as well as the growing reluctance of banks to lend for capital projects, means that many sixth-form colleges, including most Catholic ones, have nowhere to turn.

On academy conversions, I understand that some 23 sixth-form colleges have taken the opportunity to change their status and become 16-to-19 academies. That has allowed them to have their VAT costs refunded, and it provides, on average, more than £385,000 more to spend on the frontline education of students each year. Catholic sixth-form colleges, in common with all colleges that do not convert, face financial disadvantages also due to the Government’s implementation of the teachers’ pay grant. In September 2018, they extended the grant to cover 16-to-19 academies, but not sixth-form colleges or other colleges that had not converted. All Catholic sixth-form colleges were affected. They have the same workforce, pay rates and negotiating machinery as almost every 16-to-19 academy, and there is no justification for treating them differently when it comes to teachers’ pay.

Due to the religious character of Catholic sixth-form colleges, they do not have the option to convert to academies. Since they are not schools, they do not come within the legislative framework that applies to schools and which includes protections of a school’s religious character. As 16-to-19 academies, they would have to remain further education institutions but would not be governed by the statutory provisions of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, which contains the current legislative protections that enable them to be conducted as Catholic colleges.

An Act of Parliament or a change of legislation is not required to allow a sixth-form college to become a 16-to-19 academy. The position is, however, different for Catholic colleges. When maintained schools become academies they become independent schools that are subject to statutory provision and regulation, including protection of their religious character, which thereby enables them to be conducted, still, as Catholic schools. When sixth-form colleges become 16-to-19 academies, they do not come within the legislative framework that applies to independent schools, because they remain as further education institutions. However, they are also not governed by the statutory provisions of the 1992 Act. A review of the legislation, jointly undertaken by the Catholic Education Service and the Department for Education, has made it clear that the statutory protections will no longer apply to Catholic colleges post conversion to 16-to-19 academies. That includes protections in the areas of curriculum, acts of worship and the responsible body—in other words, the governance.

Furthermore, I understand that financial risk assessments for further education institutions that wish to convert into academies require any Church-controlled premises to be removed from the college’s balance sheet. That stipulation is likely to affect the perceived financial health of Catholic sixth-form colleges and place them in the position of being unable to pass the risk assessment needed to become an academy.

One solution to address those anomalies suggested by the Catholic Education Service is for the Government to explore legislative and non-legislative options for Catholic sixth-form colleges to convert while retaining their religious character. Such legislation would affect only Catholic sixth-form colleges, as there are no other religiously designated sixth-form colleges in the country. I understand that the Catholic Education Service has had useful discussions with the Department for Education about reinstating in a future education Bill the legislative protections for Catholic colleges that want to become 16-to-19 academies. Such a Bill could ensure that the protections that Catholic sixth-form colleges currently have would be mirrored if they converted into 16-to-19 academies. I understand that only a short clause would be needed, although it is difficult to know when such a Bill might emerge in a future Queen’s Speech, or, given the way that Brexit is affecting the parliamentary timetable, how soon the House of Commons and the House of Lords might realistically have a chance to debate such a provision. It is also not clear whether such a clause is the Government’s preferred option for protecting the future of Catholic sixth-form colleges.

It is worth noting that non-Catholic sixth-form colleges that want to become academies have benefited from some £10 million of Government funding through the area review restructuring facility. I understand that that facility, from which Catholic sixth-form colleges have been clearly unable to benefit, closes this month.

Conor McGinn: Does my hon. Friend agree that the sense of urgency within the Catholic sixth-form college sector about this matter cannot be stressed enough to the Minister? Representatives of Carmel College have told me that they have had to reduce the number of subjects they teach and have larger class sizes, but they are also having to lay off staff. That is not sustainable or viable, nor is it something that any of us want, so I urge the Minister to address that anomaly quickly.

Gareth Thomas: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention on behalf of Carmel College; he makes his point extremely well. Capital funding, VAT refunds and the teachers’ pay grant are all areas of finance for post-16 academies that Catholic sixth-form colleges, like other non-academy post-16 colleges, are not benefiting from. That is short-changing Catholic students, and also many other students who benefit from attending those other institutions.

As the number of 16 to 18-year-olds is set to increase, it is important that funding is maximised available to deal with that demographic upsurge. Sixth-form colleges, at large specialist 16-to-18 institutions with proven track records, are well placed to help to cater for the coming upturn in student numbers, but they urgently need...
access to sufficient capital funding to build the necessary capacity. The Sixth Form Colleges Association believes that establishing a capital expansion fund for dedicated 16-to-18 educational institutions such as sixth-form colleges is the way to break that capital impasse. Other colleges also deserve to be able to access proper capital funding, such as Harrow College and Stanmore College, which serve my constituency. That would help to increase the number of young people being educated in high-performing institutions, at a lower cost to the public purse and with a higher likelihood of success than continuing to establish new, usually much smaller providers.

The critical issue is that since 2010 the further education sector has been held back through lack of investment. Over the past 10 years, colleges have had to deal with an average funding cut of 30%, while at the same time costs have increased dramatically. As I alluded to, other colleges in Harrow such as Harrow College and Stanmore College have been hit financially, reflecting problems across the English post-16 sector. Further education is the only part of the education budget to have been cut year on year since 2010. That drop in funding has had a real impact on staff pay: on average, college teachers are now paid at less than 80% of the rate of school staff. The latest Association of Colleges workforce survey suggests that average lecturer pay in colleges is just over £35,000—significantly lower than average schoolteacher pay and university academic pay, which are £35,000 and just over £43,000 respectively. The value of staff pay has fallen by more than 25% since 2009, and staff turnover rates in colleges averaged 17% in 2017, which is the most recent year for which stats are available. The hardest-to-fill posts are teaching jobs in engineering, construction and mathematics.

The recent ring-fenced teachers’ pay grant for schools was not extended to further education colleges, which made it even more difficult for Catholic sixth-form colleges and other post-16 institutions to recruit the teachers they need. Schoolteachers received a pay rise of up to 3.5%, whereas college staff did not, which is simply unfair. Extending the teachers’ pay grant to Catholic sixth-form colleges and all other non-academy 16-to-19 institutions would relieve pressure on the frontline and begin to level the playing field between institutions that are delivering effectively the same type of education. The cost would be comparatively small, but the impact would be significant—not just on the financial position of individual colleges, but in reassuring the sector that its work, curriculum and workforce were properly understood and appreciated by the Government.

In short, students do not deserve to be discriminated against. If students attend a college that is not an academy, the Government are discriminating against them, as they allow academy colleges to be better funded. Catholic sixth-form colleges and their students are doubly disadvantaged, as those colleges cannot convert to become academies even if they want to. It is high time that Catholic sixth-form colleges, like other non-academy colleges, got the same funding as academies; that this double discrimination was brought to an end; and, crucially, that funding for all post-16 education was significantly improved. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, for what I believe is the first time. I congratulate my neighbour, the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), on securing this debate at an important time for not only Catholic education, but education as a whole. It was a great pleasure to chair the Backbench Business Committee and give him the opportunity to hold this debate.

I rise for a number of reasons, the first of which is fairness. I have always strongly believed in a parent’s right to choose the type of education they want for their children, be that a church school, any other form of religious school, or a secular school—I do not take a particular view. Equally, parents should have the right to choose whether their child receives single-sex or mixed education. One of the great beauties of the London borough of Harrow, which my neighbour and I share, is that we have education for Hindus, Jews, Catholics and Protestants, and we will soon have a Muslim state school as a result of parental demand.

St Dominic’s Sixth Form College, which is in my neighbour’s constituency, has as its main feeders two Catholic schools in my constituency: Salvatorian College and Sacred Heart Language College. They are 11-to-16 schools, both Catholic in nature, and the natural progression for their pupils is to go on to St Dominic’s college. However, St Dominic’s does not just take young people from Salvatorian College and Sacred Heart; as my neighbour alluded to, it takes young people from across north-west London. It has quite a long reach into a number of London boroughs.

The nature of St Dominic’s, and of other Catholic colleges, is that they provide excellent education. That is why they are in demand, after all. It is worth remembering that in many ways we have such advanced education across this country because of the investment made by the Church of England and the Catholic Church going back way before we had state education. It is important to understand that the colleges are excellent. They provide a very good standard of education, are well led and have excellent teachers. That is the feature of a good education system, so it is grossly unfair that they are disadvantaged.

I rise to seek fairness in the system for Catholic sixth-form colleges. It is fair to say that when we have changed the funding formula, sixth forms generally have suffered. Clearly, the priority has been on young people between the ages of 11 and 16, who have a higher rate of funding than sixth forms. A head or member of a governing body of a school, college or whatever that teaches people from the ages of 11 to 18 can adjust the funding to ensure a spread throughout the institution, but a sixth-form college is totally dependent on the funding that comes in for those young people between the ages of 16 and 18. The slight problem is that the average funding is £4,545 for a sixth-form student, which is 15% lower than that for 11 to 16-year-olds. Straightaway, sixth-form colleges are at a disadvantage from a revenue perspective.

One of the challenges in Harrow is that Sacred Heart Language College has always been full. It is an excellent school, so there has been a steady flow of young women going on to St Dominic’s or beyond. It is fair to say that
Salvatorian College has had real challenges. However, it is being completely rebuilt and we are looking forward to the new premises opening completely. The school is now full with young boys coming through, so the impact on St Dominic’s will be even greater. The college is full, and as the hon. Member for Harrow West alluded to, there is little if any space to expand. Even if we could get hold of the money required, expansion is a real challenge, given where it is located and that it has such a tight site.

The impact on the funding level is important. Colleges—sixth-form colleges and Catholic sixth-form colleges in particular—are dropping courses in modern languages as a result of funding pressures. When we are trying to encourage the development of modern languages, it is not helpful if colleges are dropping them due to funding. Equally, we are trying to get young people better educated in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. When we are encouraging them to do STEM subjects, it is a disaster for colleges to drop those courses.

There are other issues. St Dominic’s is having to put young people in much larger class sizes to try to use the facilities available. I visited the college only last week. It has a plan to expand into lecture halls, as opposed to classrooms, to try to use facilities to their maximum capability. There is good sense to that. Teachers can lecture, but then there still needs to be the capacity for one-to-one teaching subsequently. As has been mentioned by my neighbour, the hon. Member for Harrow West, and in various interventions, we have a crisis.

John Howell: What effect is the situation that my hon. Friend describes having on university applications and the success that Catholic sixth-form colleges have had in getting people into good universities to do good courses?

Bob Blackman: I thank my neighbour for congratulating me on my speech. I look forward to him congratulating me on many occasions on my speeches in this place and in the main Chamber. He makes an important point. We are going into the comprehensive spending review, where there is an opportunity for the Government to make some changes. I am not sure whether we need a change in the law to ensure that Catholic sixth-form colleges receive the pay award that other colleges receive. If that change is needed, we should get on and do it. Given that the Government seem to find time to adjust the law when they wish, it may be that that would be relatively easy to do. I do not think there would be any disagreement across the House on the need for the measure.

If we could reach a point where Catholic sixth-form colleges could academise, get the benefits of academy status and reclaim VAT costs, that would be an enormous boost to their revenue funding. Equally, if we could remove any measures that prevent senior staff from holding a particular faith, that would remove the challenge that many such colleges face.

The hon. Member for Harrow West raised the issue of capital funding. Why would a bank lend to a college if its revenue funding was already challenged and it might not be able to repay the loan? That is one of the key challenges in raising capital. There needs to be a fund available to Catholic sixth-form colleges from which they can draw in order to provide capital provision within the system. All Catholic sixth-form colleges suffer the same challenge of how to expand and get more revenue funding. If they do not have the capital, they are clearly not able to expand. Their revenue base is a particular challenge.

In terms of the money for 2019-20, if the teachers’ pay award was extended to Catholic sixth-form colleges, it would cost only £2.5 million—a relatively small amount compared with the overall budget—but it would make a huge difference to the colleges that need to pay it. As my neighbour, the hon. Member for Harrow West, has mentioned, if we could get to a position whereby Catholic sixth-form colleges were allowed to academise or possibly join multi-academy trusts, it would assist them to some degree. At a time when the majority of young people in this country are taught in academies, it seems unfair that Catholic sixth-form colleges are discriminated against and do not have the capacity to opt in. If they were an 11-to-18 school, they could academise, but because they have chosen to be a sixth-form Catholic college, they cannot. That does not make sense in this day and age.

We have T-levels coming on stream. It seems ridiculous that sixth-form colleges are dropping STEM courses when we are trying to develop T-levels. They will be properly on stream by 2023, but we need action now.
10.12 am

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Davies. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) delivered an excellent and comprehensive speech, so I do not think that I need to add much. As he mentioned, I have a Catholic sixth-form college, St Brendan’s, in my constituency, although it serves a wide catchment area that stretches as far as Weston-super-Mare. My hon. Friends the Members for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) and for Bristol South (Karim Smyth) have all visited the college. They are great supporters of it and would have been here today to speak in its defence if they had been able to.

I do not hold a particular torch for faith-based education. I have some reservations about it, although I think that a greater problem is where demographics in a particular area lead to a school being de facto one culture. I say this as someone who grew up in Luton and went to Luton Sixth Form College, which was very diverse, but some of the schools there, just because of where people live, tend not to be as diverse as they could be. We are fortunate in Bristol that all the schools, including St Brendan’s, have a healthy mix of pupils from different backgrounds. Although St Brendan’s is a Catholic sixth-form college and priority is given to students from Catholic schools, it is very diverse.

St Brendan’s clearly has an ethical focus to its teaching, but the Catholicism is not too evident. Catholic parents get the faith-based education that they want for their children, but children from all faiths feel comfortable there and the college is doing well. It has significant plans to expand, which presents some challenges, particularly in relation to traffic, because it is at the top of the most congested road in my constituency, but we can address that. There is also the challenge that school sixth forms are smaller and struggle to provide a broader curriculum. If St Brendan’s expands, the school sixth forms be no longer viable? However, I still support its expansion because, as I have said, it provides an excellent service.

When I have been to St Brendan’s I have always been impressed by how open-minded the college is and how receptive it is to discussing issues across all faiths and no faiths. I attended a session there once after some young pupils from elsewhere in the Bristol school system had led a nationwide campaign against female genital mutilation. The sixth form brought the young women to talk to a group of pupils about issues within the community and about FGM. It was a real eye-opener for the pupils and was a really good thing to do. I have also met the feminist society there.

I had a meeting recently with the principal and a couple of student reps, one of whom said, “I identify as gender-neutral”, and not an eyelid was batted. Some people have real fears about what a faith-based organisation looks like, particularly a Catholic college, but St Brendan’s is as far from bigoted as we would want an educational establishment to be. There is also a real focus on international development, which links with the work of lots of churches in my constituency that do really good work with overseas communities, as does St Brendan’s as well.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West said, St Brendan’s and the other Catholic sixth-form colleges face double discrimination. Sixth-form academies do not have to pay VAT, but sixth-form colleges do. We have debated that before in the broader context of how sixth-form colleges are treated, and we are all keen for the Minister to move forward on that. Other sixth-form colleges have the get-out clause that they can convert to academies and receive funding as a result. Only the Catholic sixth-form colleges cannot, which is particularly unfair when schools that convert to academies can retain their current status. It seems completely anomalous, as has been said, that Catholic sixth-form colleges are treated differently from other sixth-form colleges, and differently from other Catholic schools.

The hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) mentioned another issue. I was not expecting to speak in today’s debate, so I do not have the figures to hand, but there is an issue with pupils in sixth-form colleges receiving less funding than pupils in schools. There is also still an issue with third-year funding, whereby they get even less if the pupil stays on at the sixth form for three years. Perhaps the school system failed the young people; perhaps they simply were not ready to grapple with education; or perhaps there were issues with their home circumstances. We have a lot of children in Bristol who have come from fairly chaotic family backgrounds. They might come from refugee families, for example. For one reason or another, they might not have left school with the GSCEs that we would want them to, so they might need to do their GCSEs at St Brendan’s. As I understand it, if they stay on for three years, the college gets less funding once they have passed 18. That might have been rectified because we have raised it with the Minister before, but perhaps he will address that point. As has been said, rectifying that would require only a short clause in the next education Bill. The discussions have been going on for a very long time.

I will finish by referring to a note that Michael Jaffrain, the principal of St Brendan’s, sent me recently, in which he asked me to speak in the debate. He said that the fact that Catholic sixth-form colleges are not allowed to become academies “seriously limits choices in terms of future strategy.” I have already said that the college has huge ambitions to expand, which I support. The principal also said:

“The ability not to be able to convert into the schools sector is now starting to have a real bite. Unlike the sixth form colleges who have converted, St Brendan’s will not receive any additional funding to cover the 2% increase in teacher pay and there is still no commitment that we will be fully funded for the 7% increase in teacher pension contributions. This, alongside the injustice that, unlike schools sixth forms, we still also have to pay VAT on all goods and services we purchase, is now putting a considerable strain on our finances and the ability to continue to deliver an outstanding education to our community.”
St Brendan’s serves not only my constituency, but constituencies in a significant range around the Bristol area. It is so important that we do all that we can to support it.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): This is a so-called EVEL debate—English votes for English laws—so we do not have a representative of the Scottish National party. I therefore call Mike Kane to speak for the Labour party.

10.20 am

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. Referring to a faith-based debate as an “EVEL debate” might not be the best phraseology.

In addition to being the Front-Bench spokesperson, I should declare that I am the convenor of the Catholic legislators’ network in Parliament. It is important that I put that on the record. It is a real pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West, who is an assiduous campaigner for his constituents. Both of us would like to see a day when we are not talking about academisation, but about the co-operation of more of our schools up and down the country. He is the country’s leading campaigner for the co-operative movement, in my opinion.

My second interest to declare is that I am a product of Loreto College in Manchester. Having grown up in a council flat and a council house, going to Loreto at the age of 16 widened my horizons unbelievably. It turned me on to politics. I had a lecturer called Colleen Harris, who is still alive. I want to get it in Hansard that I would not be in this place had it not been for her. Coming down here for the first time and seeing Parliament was one of the most amazing experiences that I got from going to that sixth form.

I was glad to visit the college the other week, to campaign to raise the rate, and to speak to the principal, Peter McGhee, who is also the principal of St John Rigby College in Wigan. It is great to know that my principal, Sister Patricia, is still on Loreto’s governing body. The only bit of the college that is left is the 19th-century grade II listed chapel. Otherwise, the college has been rebuilt completely, and serves the whole community of Manchester and Greater Manchester. In terms of social mobility, there was nowhere like it. It helped people from poor backgrounds such as my own to move forward, along with Xaverian College in Rusholme.

The Catholic Church is the biggest provider of education on the planet, and tomorrow 1.2 billion Catholics around the world will be celebrating one of their most solemn feasts: Ash Wednesday. It is a period of reflection, fast and abstinence, but for sixth-form colleges in this country the last 10 years have been a period of fast and abstinence. I want to put some of the figures that have already been stated on to the record. Since 2010, funding for 16 to 18-year-olds has been cut sharply. That is why we are talking about this matter today. Costs have risen, the needs of students have become more complex and the Government have demanded much more of colleges.

Recent research from London Economics found that, in real terms, sixth-form colleges received £1,380 less per student in 2016-17 than in 2010-11—a 22% decline in funding. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown that funding per student aged 16 to 18 has seen the biggest squeeze of all stages of education for young people in recent years. We have had debate after debate in this Chamber about schools, but school funding started to be cut only in about 2015. Since then, about £1.7 billion has been taken out of the system. However, we have seen a continual attack on sixth-form colleges since 2010.

Sixth-form colleges are in a strange place. It is interesting that the Minister and I speak for stand-alone sixth-form colleges, but the responsibility for further education colleges sits with our counterparts in our teams. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East highlighted in his very good speech, funding per sixth-former is £4,545. That is 15% lower than for 11 to 16-year-olds, which is £5,341, and half the average university tuition fee, which is £8,901.

The impact on students could not be clearer. A recent funding impact survey found that 50% of schools and colleges have dropped courses in modern foreign languages as a result of funding pressures. As has been pointed out, 34% have dropped STEM subjects—science, technology, engineering, maths—and 67% have reduced student support services and extracurricular activities. Some 77% of schools are teaching students in larger class sizes. The national funding rate for 16 and 17-year-olds has remained frozen at £4,000 per student since 2013-14. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East pointed out, the rate for 18-year-olds is even lower, at £3,300 per student.

There is only one way to ensure that schools and colleges can continue to deliver competitively good sixth-form education, and that is to raise the rate. I congratulate the Sixth Form Colleges Association on its fine campaign on the issue. According to London Economics, raising the rate would protect student support services, mental health support and minority subject support, and would increase non-qualification time, extracurricular activities and work experience for those in sixth-form colleges. The Government like to target funding at individual subjects or qualifications, but that has had little impact; there are just higgledy-piggledy pots of money here and there for sixth-form colleges to bid for. As the hon. Member for Harrow East stated, the £500 million for T-levels—the Government’s proposed suite of technical qualifications—will not materialise until 2023.

The key point that has been made today is that the option to convert is not currently available to Catholic sixth-form colleges. Colleges that do not change status lose out in multiple ways, as has been mentioned. First, although school sixth forms and 16- to-19 academies have their VAT costs refunded, sixth-form colleges do not. That leaves the average sixth-form college with £386,000 less to spend on the frontline education of students each year.

Secondly, as has also been pointed out, sixth-form colleges face a further financial disadvantage due to the Government’s implementation of the teachers’ pay grant. In September 2018 the Government extended the teachers’ pay grant to cover 16- to-19 academies, but not sixth-form colleges. The Minister has to tell us why that is the case.
Extending the teachers’ pay grant would make a huge difference. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West said in an intervention, we really need an answer from the Minister on that.

VAT and the teachers’ pay grant are the two examples of how sixth-form colleges are treated differently from 16-to-19 academies and schools. One solution would be to address both anomalies without requiring sixth-form colleges to change their legal status, but the other—and perhaps more realistic—solution would be for the Government to explore some legislative change. At the moment, Catholic sixth-form colleges will not convert for fear of losing their religious character, particularly if there were some sort of judicial review or legal challenge.

Non-Catholic sixth-form colleges have benefited from £10 million for conversion. That is another anomaly—Catholic sixth-form colleges have not been allowed to bid for that money, as my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) pointed out. He also spoke admirably about Carmel College in his constituency. The Government should commit to allowing Catholic sixth-form colleges to change their status after the March deadline in the area reviews, and ensure that they can access Government funding.

Catholic sixth-form colleges are prevented from converting to academies as their religious character, protected under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, would not be maintained under current Government rules. They suggest that they would lose protections in areas of the curriculum, acts of worship and governance. Most Catholic sixth-form colleges in this country provide a religious education basis, which is not funded through their Government funding, and extracurricular activities such as mass and prayer, which are unfunded, and chaplaincy work. The key nature of a Catholic sixth-form college and the essence of its governance, and the reason that they are education institutions that are highly prized, is their very strong ethical character in Catholic social teaching. The social teaching in the colleges is driven by human dignity, solidarity, subsidiarity and preferential option for the poor, and that is what is highly prized by parents, both those of the Catholic faith and those not of the faith.

The director of the Catholic Education Service, Paul Barber, said in an article that “because academisation legislation for SFCs was developed separately from schools, the same safeguards given to schools were omitted for Catholic SFCs”.

Under current Government rules, the colleges would lose protections for the religious character of areas of the curriculum, acts of worship and governance if they converted. Primary legislation would be required, but we have been discussing this for 28 months, and no action has been taken.

It would be an enormous act of good faith for the Government to begin to act. We have seen the problems that have arisen with the Conservative party’s manifesto commitment on the cap on new free schools for Catholic schools, which has led to the Catholic Church refusing to build any more schools in this country, when perhaps 50 are needed in London and 12 in East Anglia. The Government refused to raise the cap. Faith schools are feeling quite battered at the moment, particularly in a muscular liberal secularised world, and are concerned about their status with the Government. It would be an enormous act of good faith for the Minister to act on some of the issues facing Catholic sixth-form colleges today.

10.32 am

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. It is not for the first time in my case, but I am not going to say that it is too often—it is never enough.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) on securing this debate. Catholic sixth-form colleges make an important contribution to education in this country and the Government recognise the distinctive role that they play. To address the important issue raised by the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), we value faith schools generally. I share the view of my hon. Friend. I am aware that the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills has met the hon. Member for Harrow West to discuss the issues facing this group of colleges. The Minister has also recently seen at first hand the quality of the educational and wider opportunities provided to young people at St. Dominic’s Sixth Form College in Harrow. I welcome the opportunity to explore the issues further today.

I want to begin by paying tribute to all the hard-working staff, principals, heads and governors in those colleges. Sixth-form colleges at their best not only provide excellent academic education, but help provide direction to young people and help them to grow in maturity through those crucial years. They allow young people to develop outside a school environment, giving them the aspiration to achieve in whatever field, job or career they want to pursue. Catholic sixth-form colleges provide that within an atmosphere of moral guidance and pastoral support.

Catholic sixth-form colleges represent a significant proportion of sixth-form colleges in England—14 out of 60, not including those that have become academies—and 17% of sixth-form college students attend a Catholic college. Such colleges are focused on meeting the needs of local communities and are key to our drive to improve social mobility. A high proportion of students in sixth-form colleges and 16-to-19 academies are from disadvantaged backgrounds. Colleges provide excellent support to help those students achieve high results and progress to sustained education, apprenticeships or employment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) was right to point to the priority that Catholic sixth-form colleges give to social justice. My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) pointed out that 12 of the 14 Catholic sixth-form colleges are rated “good” or “outstanding”. Academic excellence has always been, and remains, at the core. More than a third of sixth-form colleges are rated by Ofsted as “outstanding”.

Looking at the 14 Catholic sixth-form colleges in England, the picture is even better, with seven out of the 14 rated
 Nick Gibb: That will be very much an issue for the next spending review, but perhaps a neater solution would be to address the issue of the conversion of Catholic sixth-form colleges to academy status. I am aware that the issue of academy conversion is very significant for this group of colleges. Indeed, each Catholic sixth-form college was asked to consider joining an academy in the reports of the further education area reviews covering their areas, but I understand that only three of the 14 made an immediate decision not to pursue that option.

I should explain—as other hon. Members have explained—that the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 includes specific freedoms, which permit Catholic sixth-form colleges to maintain and develop their religious character. Fully equivalent protections are not included in the legal framework if the 16-to-19 academies, which are a distinctive type of institution compared with other academies established through the Education Act 2011. The provisions that allow sixth-form colleges to consider

promising. The position has been made more difficult by reducing numbers of students. The number of 16 to 18-year-olds in the population has been falling for 10 years and it is now 10% lower than in 2008-09.

The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) raised the issue of the lower base funding rate for the third year of 16-to-19 education. She is right to do so, but that lower level does not apply to students with special educational needs.

As the hon. Members for Harrow West and for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) pointed out, capital funding is a key concern for sixth-form colleges. Unlike general further education colleges, sixth-form colleges can bid for the condition improvement fund along with schools. Unlike academies, SFCs can borrow, and many have productive relationships with banks, although some of them have found it harder to borrow in recent years—a point that was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East.

We recognise that an important challenge facing sixth-form colleges in many areas over the coming years is to prepare for the anticipated increase in student numbers. That increase is, of course, an opportunity to recruit additional students and receive the associated increased funding, but in some cases it needs extra upfront investment—for example, to build new classrooms—so we will look carefully in the spending review at how we can help colleges to prepare for the increase in student numbers that many of them now anticipate.

As the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) pointed out, the 16-to-19 phase has not kept up with costs. We protected that has been achieved in increasingly challenging financial circumstances.

Of course, an Ofsted rating is only a snapshot and I know that colleges are constantly reviewing their practices and procedures to see whether further improvements can be made. Two Catholic sixth-form colleges, for example, have benefited from support from the Government’s strategic college improvement fund. St Dominic’s Sixth Form College is partnering with St Francis Xavier Sixth Form College in south London. The fund supports colleges to improve the quality of provision and helps to mobilise and strengthen improvement capacity within the further education sector.

I congratulate sixth-form colleges on the successful implementation of the reforms to A-levels over the last few years, with the first wave of exams in 13 new subjects in 2017 and a further 12 last year. The reforms will continue to be rolled out over the next two years, with the first exams in a further 20 new A-levels in summer this year and another 13 next year. Exam reform is never easy. In the last 30 years, we have had four significant reforms to A-levels—the introduction of the advanced supplementaries, Curriculum 2000, which introduced the AS/A2 structure, the introduction of the A* grade a decade ago and now demodularisation.

In the run-up to the spending review that is expected later this year, we have been looking closely at sustainability and funding of the FE sector, including sixth-form colleges. The Government understand that the sector faces significant challenges, and the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills has made it a personal priority to address the constraints and their impact over the last year. Campaigns such as “Love our Colleges”, and “Raise the Rate” have helped raise the profile of FE and sixth-form colleges and their important work.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East raised the issue of 16-to-19 funding for colleges compared with sixth forms in schools. We have ended that unfair discrimination between colleges and schools. All institutions now receive funding according to the same base rate. The funding system aims to ensure a common entitlement. The same formula is applied to all students and different institutions now receive the same funding rate.

However, we recognise that funding per student in the 16-to-19 phase has not kept up with costs. We protected the base rate for funding for 16 to 19-year-olds at £4,000 until the end of this spending review period, but that is, of course, against the backdrop of previous reductions and the impact of inflation—reductions that happened because we had to tackle the historic and unsustainable deficit that we inherited in 2010, representing 10% of GDP. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East pointed out, we prioritised protecting core school funding to mobilise and strengthen improvement capacity within the further education sector.
faith when appointing governors and staff, and that allow them to teach religious education and provide collective worship in line with tenets of the Catholic faith, do not currently exist for 16-to-19 academies.

When the legislative framework for 16-to-19 academies was first established, we did not envisage establishing them as faith-based 16-to-19 institutions. At the time, our view was that EU directive 2000/78/EC prevented the creation of new post-16 vocational institutions with a religious character. We had adopted a blanket approach, so that no post-16 provision could be established with a religious character. We are now exploring how to put in place the right conditions to enable Catholic sixth-form colleges to convert to academy status with their existing freedoms.

I know that my ministerial colleagues have met representatives of Catholic sixth-form colleges and the Catholic Education Service to discuss this issue. As the hon. Member for Harrow West pointed out, it would require primary legislation to make the necessary changes, but the Government’s legislative programme does not yet provide the scope for such legislation. We will of course keep this under review in future parliamentary Sessions, and we will continue to work with this group of colleges and with the hon. Gentleman to try to find a solution to this problem.

Bob Blackman: Clearly there is the issue of any potential legal impediment. Will the Minister confirm that, provided the United Kingdom leaves the European Union on 29 March, that legal impediment will fall way and it would be up to the Government to bring forward a change in the law—a private Member’s Bill could achieve the same—that would enable Catholic sixth-form colleges to academise if they chose to do so?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I think later legal advice shows that the issue is more nuanced than that, and it might be possible to legislate even while we remain subject to the EU directive. I very much hope that we can take that forward when an opportunity arises.

Last year, sixth-form colleges raised concerns about the creation of new 16-to-19 free schools and the approvals process for academies to create new sixth-form provision. We have listened to those concerns and strengthened the criteria we use to assess new sixth-form proposals. For all schools that apply to open a sixth form, we have set a clear requirement that all local sixth-form and FE colleges must be consulted prior to a business case being submitted. Furthermore, during the last free school application wave, we were explicit that all applications for new 16-to-19 provision must provide evidence of need for additional places in the area, and that any request is likely to be approved by exception only. In the guidance for wave 14, which we published recently, this requirement was strengthened further.

I conclude as I began: by paying tribute to the excellent academic achievements of Catholic sixth-form colleges and their support for improving social mobility among students from disadvantaged backgrounds. I recognise that such colleges have particularly felt the tightening financial circumstances, despite our protection of the base rate of funding. The issue of academisation is significant for the sector.

I echo the sentiments of the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills when she spoke at the winter conference of the Sixth Form Colleges Association in January. As we prepare for the spending review, explaining the issues through opportunities such as this debate will help provide strong arguments for the sector. More importantly, the continued delivery of excellent education and strong pastoral support and guidance will be the best advert for further investment in Catholic sixth-form colleges and all colleges in this important and high-performing sector.

10.47 am

Gareth Thomas: This has been an extremely good debate. I reinforce my gratitude to the Backbench Business Committee for allowing me to secure it, and to Back-Bench colleagues and the shadow Minister for their contributions. I also thank the Minister for his thorough response. However, I have to say that from listening to him speak—notwithstanding the thorough contribution he made—it is clear that the double discrimination that Catholic sixth-form colleges face is unlikely to end any time soon.

I urge the Minister and Secretary of State for Education to give this issue further priority in the months to come. If the issue of the next teachers’ pay award being fully funded—not just funded in full for those colleges that have converted to become academies—could be resolved quickly, it would certainly provide some reassurance to Catholic sixth-form colleges and other post-16 institutions that are not academies. This issue needs to be sorted out. Although it is good that the Minister has been able to focus on it today, clearly more urgency is needed.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of Catholic sixth form colleges.

10.50 am

Sitting suspended.
UK Relations with Kosovo

11 am

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered UK relations with Kosovo.

There have been three major debates about Kosovo in the history of this House. It is fittin to have this debate this month, because the first of those three debates took place in the shadow of war, on 25 March 1999, when the then Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, flew back from the European Council at Berlin—NATO air forces had commanded strikes against military targets in Yugoslavia the night before. Justifying that action, and mentioning the unity that eight NATO countries had demonstrated in taking that action, he said:

“The solid basis for that unity is our common revulsion at the violent repression that we witness in Kosovo. Since March last year, well over 400,000 people in Kosovo have at some point been driven from their homes. That is about a fifth of the total population.”—[Official Report, 25 March 1999; Vol. 328, c. 536.] I had many conversations with Robin Cook about Kosovo. My first interest in the country came from meeting members of the diaspora of 80,000 refugees from the war at one point. After Robin Cook resigned over the Iraq war, his office was next to mine. We had two conversation topics: Kosovo, which I learned a great deal about from talking to him, and horseracing. He misjudged me as an expert on horseracing, so I had to do a lot of swatting up—more than on Kosovo. He is remembered with great affection in Kosovo.

We had to wait eight years for the next debate, on 27 June 2007, led by the hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard). He made one or two gentle criticisms of American policy—I will follow that tradition in a moment. This debate, 20 years after that action, was inspired by my recent visit with my co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Kosovo, the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers). We went for the eleventh celebration of Kosovan independence. I thank the chargé d’affaires in London, Heroina Telaku, Her Majesty’s ambassador in Pristina, Ruairí O’Connell, and all the staff for making the arrangements.

We took with us three rising stars from the British Kosovan community; Freskim Rushiti, a banker; Artan Llabjani, from the British Albanian Business Association; and Fadil Maqedonci, who runs the Koha bar in Leicester Square, where Robin Cook went to meet some Kosovans during the war. We had a fascinating time and learned a great deal. Kosovo is now recognised by 116 countries, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank and, importantly, by FIFA, the International Olympic Committee and UEFA. I will finish my remarks in a few minutes on sport. We had the honour to see Prekaz, which was the centre of much of the fighting, and the Jashari graves—a whole family bar one young girl were massacred, and the anniversary of that massacre is today. It made a great impression on the hon. Member for Cleethorpes and me. There are still 3,000 people missing from that war—not just Albanians but Serbs too.

I have some general points about contemporary issues in Kosovo and remarks about the contribution that the Kosovan diaspora can make. I was pleased that last week the President of Kosovo said that land swaps would never occur. Last year he talked about border corrections with Serbia, but that was the wrong approach.

Quite a lot of money was spent on lobbying in London and elsewhere on the issue, but I am glad the President has changed approach. The Prime Minister and the Parliament were right to be wary of land swaps, border corrections or whatever they are called. They could be very destabilising in the Balkans.

A delegation from North Macedonia is in Parliament at the moment, whom I was talking to yesterday. When borders start getting swapped in the Balkans, it can be destabilising. One member of the diaspora told me that land swaps should never be an issue for just one man to decide, and Kosovo as a nation will never allow it to happen. The Parliament’s approach to have a negotiating team, involving opposition parties, is a good one. Given that the President has clarified his position, I hope the United States will back a way from statements that some officials have made to suggest land swaps, deals with President Putin and so on. A sober approach is needed, and I hope progress can be made.

It was good to see the Kosovan army on parade for the first time. Before this year, they were a defence force. It is an appropriate move for Kosovo to make.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Good work has been done by our own UK Government to support the reform and restructuring of the police force, among other initiatives. That is essential for this war-ravaged area. Nothing must be allowed to detract from the advance to more modern and acceptable policing. Some of my constituents who are ex-Royal Ulster Constabulary and Police Service of Northern Ireland are involved in some of that training. They are doing excellent work and should be commended for it.

John Grogan: The hon. Gentleman is right; human rights are very important, as is the Council of Europe’s attempt to encourage normalisation and a final agreement. Countries that trade with each other are far more likely to reach a final agreement.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I am a member of the Council of Europe, which is very interested in helping to provide stability in Kosovo. One of the great things we could do, with the help of the hon. Gentleman and others, is to push the case for human rights. That has gone very slowly, despite the actions of the Council of Europe to try to increase them. Could he see his way to help with that?

John Grogan: The hon. Gentleman is right: human rights are very important, as is the Council of Europe’s work in Kosovo. The treatment of the Serb minority is important to Kosovo’s reputation and future.

The diaspora of 30,000 in the United Kingdom are important to encourage economic links. There are Kosovan students in the UK; there are five Chevening scholarships and many others besides. We also visited the Kosovo Innovation Centre, run by Uranik Begu. It was a window
on the world for many young Kosovars working in new technology in the digital economy. It was a highly skilled workforce. Fox Marble is the biggest British investor in Kosovo. It has four quarries in the centre of Kosovo and is listed on the stock exchange. Hopefully there will be more investors in future.

I suggest to Her Majesty’s Government that it may be time for a trade envoy to the Balkans—the hon. Member for Cleethorpes would be an ideal candidate. It is notable that although the Department for International Trade is involved in Belgrade and has a couple of local members of staff who cover Serbia and Montenegro, there is nothing similar in Albania and Kosovo. I hope that in time that might change. I invite you, Mr Davies, to a future event I will organise with my APPG co-chair to showcase Kosovan wine. There are 3,000 hectares of vineyards in the country. Stone Castle is the most famous name but there are others. The BBC now has a news service in Serbian, which I understand is intended to quite a lot by the minority. That has provided another news source in the past year.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend mentions the BBC. The British Council, another British institution, has an important role in the region. I did a number of projects with Kosovan young people in 2002 and 2003. Does he agree that we must redouble our efforts to ensure that the British Council is able to access both EU funding and, in the light of Brexit, other non-British funding so it can continue those important democracy-building projects with young people?

John Grogan: Yes. During our visit we heard many people praise the work of the British Council in Pristina and elsewhere in Kosovo. We also met the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, which is very active and engages with all the political parties.

It would be wrong when talking about the diaspora not to mention sport and culture. Rita Ora and Dua Lipa are both of Kosovan extraction. Mr Davies, you will be familiar with Rita Ora’s first hit, “Hot Right Now”. She has gone on to have many No. 1 hits. There is a big debate in Kosovo about which artist is the greatest. I could not possibly say, but Rita Ora’s dad has a pub in north London—the Queen’s Arms—so that probably does it for me. Nevertheless, there are many following in their footsteps.

In sport, Majlinda Kelmendi won Kosovo’s first Olympic gold medal. There is a healthy competition with Albania, which has never won a medal at the Olympics. Majlinda said she had proved to the youngsters of Kosovo that “even after the war, even after we survived a war, if they want something they can have it. If they want to be Olympic champions, they can be.”

She has inspired a whole new generation of judokas, some of whom I and the hon. Member for Cleethorpes met at the independence celebrations. There is a Yorkshire connection to everything, and one of the leading Kosovar footballers, Atdhe Nuhui, plays for Sheffield Wednesday. He came on late in the steel city derby last night. He did not manage to score, but he is one of a generation of Kosovan footballers who are inspiring the nation, too.

I will finish on football in a moment, but let me just say that corruption has to be confronted. Our ambassador, Ruairí O’Connell, made a very good speech about that recently. He pointed out that, although a high number of leading figures—more than 50, I think—had been indicted over the past three years, they had all been acquitted. He said Kosovo is “100% responsible” for dealing with corruption. That issue has to be dealt with if Kosovo wants more investment.

I mentioned football. Kosovo will play its biggest ever games against England, home and away, in the qualifiers for the European football championships at Wembley in September and in Pristina in November. I and my APPG co-chair believe that the day of the game in Pristina, which is on a Sunday afternoon, could be a day to celebrate the United Kingdom’s culture and to forge more economic links between our two countries.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Thank you. Kosovan wine, “Hot Right Now”, football—and now we have Martin Vickers.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Thank you, Mr Davies. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate my APPG co-chair, the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan), on obtaining this important debate. I concur with everything he said.

Like the hon. Gentleman, I was delighted to be in Pristina a couple of weeks ago to mark independence day on 17 February. That was the third occasion I have had the privilege of being there, and it is always a joyful occasion, on which the local people can show how proud they are of their nation. I too wish to thank our ambassador, Ruairí O’Connell, and the staff of Parliament and the Kosovan embassy here in London, who helped put together our visit and have always been extremely helpful.

We had a number of important meetings, including with the Prime Minister and other senior Ministers, but we also met important young people who are developing the economy, particularly in the IT sector. The innovation centre in Pristina was very impressive, and there are certainly opportunities, perhaps including those created by the football tournament, to develop our business connections further. As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, Fox Marble is a major British investor in Kosovo. It has testified to the fact that it is possible to do business between Kosovo and the UK, although, as has been said, there is an acknowledgement that more must be done to tackle corruption.

Having taken two or three minutes of the hon. Gentleman’s time, I will hand over to the Minister. I hope that he is able to develop the themes we have touched on.

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan) for securing the debate and for all the work he and his colleagues do to promote relations between the United Kingdom and Kosovo. I am grateful, too, for the other contributions we have heard.

As we know, the United Kingdom was the first country to recognise the independence of Kosovo 11 years ago, and we are as committed to friendship and partnership
with Kosovo now as we were then. Today, Kosovo’s diaspora is a powerful bridge between the UK and Kosovo. As we heard, British pop star Rita Ora, who was born in Pristina, has supported Kosovo’s survivors of sexual violence by sending the clear message that their dignified fight for justice is a source of great pride. Dua Lipa, who is the daughter of Kosovan parents and winner of multiple Grammy and Brit awards, is patron of Kosovo’s Sunny Hill Foundation, which supports some of the most vulnerable people in Kosovo. Leonora Brajshori, the young British Army weightlifter, now competes for Kosovo.

Today, our two nations share a thriving and candid bilateral relationship—a relationship reinforced by our growing programme of technical assistance, which is designed to help the Government of Kosovo to deliver the reforms necessary for the country to make progress towards robust institutions and western standards of governance, and founded on our unequivocal support for Kosovo’s independence and territorial integrity, and for its integration into the international community. We are very conscious that Kosovo will struggle to reach its potential if it does not enjoy peaceful and productive relations with its neighbours, so a significant strand of our policy to help Kosovo thrive is to support greater harmony and co-operation in the region.

As the hon. Member for Keighley will have witnessed during his visits to the country, Kosovo has great potential and offers many opportunities for economic development. Kosovo has Europe’s youngest population, widespread foreign language skills and increasing digital literacy. Those assets can help Kosovo to succeed in an era when technology makes it easier than ever for ambitious individuals and companies to access consumers around the globe. That is why, through the British Council, which has been mentioned, the UK is contributing to building vital digital skills in Kosovo and right across the western Balkans with our 21st Century Schools programme. That programme, which will be launched later this month, will provide 1 million schoolchildren with coding and problem-solving skills.

On the point about the Department for International Trade, the DIT staff in Belgrade and Sarajevo cover the whole region. Foreign and Commonwealth Office staff are in close touch with the DIT to help UK companies to exploit the economic opportunities that clearly exist in the region.

However, although we are right to focus on the opportunities in Kosovo, we must also acknowledge important constraining factors. First, although Kosovo has many assets that provide trade and investment potential, there are also risks. That is why, through the embassy in Pristina, we work with the Government of Kosovo to ensure that international businesses have a level playing field and that Kosovo is tackling challenges such as corruption, uneven contract enforcement, arbitration and access to justice or remediation.

Secondly, the opportunities that exist are not equally accessible to all, which is why we and others in the international community are promoting greater inclusion of women and girls and of members of marginalised communities.

Thirdly, organised crime and corruption remain serious challenges, even after almost two decades of international support. We urge Kosovo’s leadership to do more to show that it is a reliable partner, ready to root out crime and corruption, and promote the rule of law. We put those security-related challenges at the heart of the Western Balkans summit, which we hosted last July, for good reason: we have a vested interest in helping Kosovo and the wider region to tackle the problems.

A part of Kosovo’s standing as an independent country is the development of its own armed forces, which is the sovereign right of an independent state. We continue to encourage Kosovo to do that in close consultation with NATO, and expect it to continue to co-operate closely with the Kosovo force—KFOR—as it has done to date.

Unfortunately, regional tensions continue to undermine stability and economic development in the Balkans, and recent months have brought unwelcome friction between the Governments of Serbia and Kosovo. We have seen Serbia urge countries to withdraw their recognition of Kosovo’s independence and we have seen Kosovo impose 100% tariffs on goods from Serbia and from Bosnia and Herzegovina. All that distracts from the EU facilitated dialogue on the normalisation of relations. We look to Kosovo and Serbia to seize the opportunity for an agreement, taking their inspiration from the leadership shown by Greece and what is now North Macedonia in reaching an agreement to resolve a long-standing name issue.

We believe progress between Serbia and Kosovo is possible and urgently needed, but that negotiations should not just be about speed, but should focus on reaching the optimum and most sustainable agreement. We continue to press both sides to de-escalate tensions and to return to negotiations. With our international partners, we have asked Kosovo’s Government to set out the steps they intend to take to suspend the tariffs and enable a return to the dialogue. It is in Kosovo’s interests to maintain momentum towards an agreement.

The United Kingdom believes that a dialogue agreement based on border changes risks endangering stability in Kosovo, Serbia and beyond, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in North Macedonia, as the hon. Member for Keighley said in his opening remarks. Border changes would also risk setting a precedent that could be unhelpfully exploited by third parties in the region and elsewhere. We are at an important juncture in negotiations, with the prospect of making progress this year. A conclusive and sustainable agreement would usher in an era of stability and economic development.

We urge all parties to remain focused on an agreement that strengthens regional security and stability, abides by the European principle of multi-ethnicity, commands the support of democratically elected representatives in both countries, strengthens the rule of law and comprehensively addresses all issues outstanding from previous agreements. Achieving those aims requires all sides to respect Kosovo’s democratic right to determine how and by whom the country is represented in the negotiations. Therefore, we see Kosovo’s formation of a state delegation, which it is working to put on a legal footing, as a positive step forward. A broad-based negotiating team, reflecting a plurality of voices, will be better equipped to deliver a comprehensive agreement acceptable to Kosovo’s people and Parliament.

The United Kingdom will continue to devote sustained political and diplomatic efforts to bring about such an agreement. The United Kingdom’s commitment to the development of the western Balkans is in our mutual interest. Instability and insecurity in the region have implications for the
United Kingdom and Europe, as we saw at immense human cost during the conflicts of the 1990s. As the Prime Minister made clear at our Western Balkans summit last year, the United Kingdom remains resolute in support of the region’s path towards Euro-Atlantic integration. That includes our efforts to help to resolve legacy issues, such as missing persons and war crimes, and to combat serious and organised crime.

The UK’s commitment to European security will remain steadfast after we leave the EU. To reinforce this, we are doubling our programme funding for the western Balkans to £80 million a year by 2021 and also doubling the number of staff we have in the region working to combat security threats. The UK is Kosovo’s friend. We want the country and its people to thrive, and we will help them to do so. In turn, Kosovo has to need its friends and I am proud to say that we in the United Kingdom can count ourselves among them.

Question put and agreed to.

11.25 am

Sitting suspended.

Regional Transport Infrastructure

2.30 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered investment in regional transport infrastructure.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I declare an interest as Mayor of the Sheffield city region and as a board member of Transport for the North.

This debate comes at a critical moment in our country’s history and for Britain’s regions. While the debate is about investment in our regional transport infrastructure, it is also about fairness and equality of opportunity for all parts of our country, because getting the right transport infrastructure in place will determine the ability of different parts of the country to contribute to national prosperity, as we face the future. If we believe in social mobility, we must ensure practical mobility, so that people can move around to access opportunities. Connecting people with the places that they need to go is critical if we are to connect our nation’s most talented people with the opportunities that will enable them to reach their potential.

Our country finds itself at a crossroads. We must not lose sight of the fact that in 2016 a huge number of citizens participated in one of the most important democratic exercises in our recent history: they voted for Britain to leave the European Union. I do not claim to hold all the answers as to why they did that—none of us should—because there is no overarching or unifying theory that can explain the Brexit vote. The referendum campaign became about immigration, national sovereignty, our international relationships and trade, but it was also about how well our democracy and our politics had responded to the challenges and concerns that people face in their daily and working lives.

The answer that we got was that the status quo was simply not delivering for many parts of our country, and that people wanted change. That is entirely understandable, because in places like Barnsley, which I represent, and south Yorkshire, there is an overwhelming sense of frustration that for too long the decisions made by successive Governments have not gone nearly far enough to match the aspirations and expectations of residents, and neither have they addressed the long-term structural barriers that have held communities back from reaching their potential. Alongside that is an increasing concern that for too long Britain’s regions and nations, outside London and the south-east, have not seen their fair share of investment.

I emphasise the phrase “Britain’s regions”, which I am always careful to use, because it is not about the north versus the south. Communities in the south-west, the midlands, the east of England, the north-east and the north-west, and in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, are as relevant to this debate as the communities in Yorkshire that I am proud to represent. This is not about north versus south—in fact, when it comes to transport infrastructure, the divide is often more east-west than north-south—but about the fact that city-led development has meant that growth has not been inclusive for those living outside the reach of cities.
The ink-spot approach to regional development has failed to serve many of our people and our economy. Our economic strategy has been too city-centric and dependent on the hope that wealth will trickle down and ripple out.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I agree with everything my hon. Friend is saying and I congratulate him on securing this debate. I appreciate that it is about the way that we invest, as much as where we invest. Does he agree that some of the expensive national infrastructure investment that has taken place risks alienating areas that are not regionally connected to that investment, no matter where they are in the country? For example, with HS2 there is no confirmation from the Government that the line north of York will be upgraded, which will make parts of the north even further away from that national infrastructure investment, rather than benefiting from HS2.

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend makes an important point. If this Government—or any Government—want to be taken seriously about investing in infrastructure that will benefit all parts of the country, it is absolutely right that they take into account the important and reasonable point that she makes.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does he agree that the Government need to commit to and invest in schemes that will benefit regions? For example, the western rail link to Heathrow—which the Government committed to in 2012, but about which they have since been dragging their feet—would benefit not only my constituency in Slough, but Wales, the south-west, the west and the south-east. It would mean that 20% of the UK population would be within one interchange of the Heathrow hub airport. Should the Government be dragging their feet or should they finally be taking some action?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend makes an important point, for which I am grateful. The Minister will have heard him, and perhaps he will respond later.

In rural, semi-rural or coastal areas, and in areas such as former coalfield communities like the one that I am proud to represent, there is undoubtedly a strong sense that residents feel cut off from the major centres of growth. That is partly because across our regions we have a transport system that is disjointed and serves neither communities nor businesses as well as it should.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): I, too, represent a coalfield community and can relate to what my hon. Friend is saying. One or two trains per hour serve the stations in my constituency, but two of the three stations that constituents might use have no disabled access, which means that parents with prams also struggle to use them. It is not north versus south, but it often feels like town versus city.

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend makes an important point and I will say something about the criteria that determine national infrastructure spend later. I am conscious that there will be people who will not necessarily be riveted by a debate about the criteria that determine national infrastructure spend, but as my hon. Friend clearly articulated, these are incredibly important matters that impact hugely on the lives that our constituents lead.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate and for his incredibly powerful opening speech. In Batley and Spen, we have one railway station, so would he agree that buses are needed more than ever before? With the recent shake-up of the timetable, we are getting fast buses into the cities but we are not getting connectivity between communities, which, as he has said, leaves some communities increasingly isolated.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and Yorkshire neighbour for that important intervention. I was hoping someone would refer to buses. Debates of this nature traditionally tend to focus on rail, but the reality for many of our constituents is that buses are a lifeline that enable them to go and do the things they need to do, whether that is to travel to work, access vital public services or travel in their leisure time.

I was delighted that a week ago my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who is not here, agreed to conduct an independent review of bus services in south Yorkshire. That provides an exciting opportunity to look carefully at the issue of bus services. My hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) will know that the number of people using bus services has fallen significantly in recent years. In south Yorkshire, we will look carefully at the reasons for that and look at how we can improve the bus services, which are a lifeline to many constituents.

The last two interventions highlight an important point: many people around our country feel disempowered and alienated, and that raises a big question about how we give people a stake in their communities and in our country as a whole. I believe the answer to that lies partly in how we respond to people’s concerns about Britain’s regional divide. We must respond to those concerns by strengthening our regional policy so that we have a joined-up approach to addressing the systemic structural imbalances in our economy.

We have before us a once-in-a-generation opportunity to put that right, and I believe that collectively we must rise to that challenge. As we face the future, we need to have all parts of our country contributing to Britain’s national prosperity. We in the north are prepared to do our bit, but the Government must in turn recognise the crucial role that transport infrastructure will play in helping us to do so.

Roads and railways are the lifeblood of our economy. They are vital in connecting people with the places they want to go for work, access to public services and leisure. If we are to address the long-term structural imbalances in our country’s economy so that we have stronger networks between towns, cities and rural locations, we must have a serious programme of investment in our transport infrastructure. That must include investment in innovative technologies such as tram-train, the first of which we have in south Yorkshire, running between Sheffield and Rotherham.

Integrated with all that is the need to do all we can to promote active travel as a means of getting out and about within our towns and cities. I know the Minister will be supportive of that. Chris Boardman has been doing a sterling job as Mayor Andy Burnham’s walking
and cycling commissioner in Greater Manchester. I will soon be announcing the appointment of an active travel commissioner for the Sheffield city region, and I have received confirmation that the next Transport for the North board meeting in April will, for the first time, include discussion of active travel, which I very much welcome.

Active travel is not about telling residents that they should ditch their cars or public transport, but about giving them the option to lead healthier, more active lives by investing in infrastructure to encourage more sustainable transport, walking and cycling—maybe even running, but we will see how that one goes.

We know the benefits of having strong transport networks in place around good economic infrastructure. Commuters find it easier to access sites of employment. Businesses can shift their goods to both domestic and international markets. Strong transport infrastructure is a key driver of both productivity and growth, but, unfortunately, too many communities across the north know all too well the consequences of poor connectivity. It has an impact on residents living in rural and semi-rural areas, who struggle to access the major sites of employment. It constrains the reach of our businesses, wastes the talent and skills of our workforce, and stilles our competitiveness. It is a drag on our productivity.

When we get this right, we can make a real difference. I will give an example of where we have done that. The Great Yorkshire Way is a stretch of road built to link up Doncaster Sheffield airport with the M18. The last mile of the Great Yorkshire Way is the most significant mile of road built in south Yorkshire for decades. From an initial investment of £56 million, with both the public and the private sectors working together, our region unlocked £1.8 billion-worth of investment, creating 1,200 jobs, supporting national airport capacity by delivering airport, and aiding the development of iPort, which is one of the UK’s largest logistics developments. All of that was achieved while regenerating a former colliery community.

In order to achieve our potential, the north’s existing and future economic clusters must be better connected.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Like others, I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing this important debate to the Chamber. He makes a powerful argument, particularly in favour of infrastructure support for all regions. In the north, one of the most important infrastructure support projects is Northern Powerhouse Rail, but unfortunately it is reliant on the successful completion of HS2, which itself is in doubt. Does he agree that we need these projects to go ahead regardless and not be reliant on London-based projects?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. I agree with him, and in just a moment I will say more about Northern Powerhouse Rail, because it is an important case.

Before I do, I will give another example of how we can achieve growth as a result of investment in regional transport infrastructure: the plan for an east coast main line link-up with Doncaster Sheffield airport. The creation of a station serving the airport has so much potential. It will support the expansion of the airport, create a major economic hub around it and make a further contribution to the UK’s national aviation capacity.

Better connecting our communities and neighbourhoods is how we give people the means to get from where they live to the economic opportunities that are being created around us. It is how we give businesses the means to shift their goods from one place to another in the most cost-effective and efficient way. The truth of the matter is, though, that there are not enough instances where we have managed to achieve those things, because despite having the ambition, we have not had the investment.

Transport for the North has a key role to play in looking at how we can make significant improvements right across the north of England. Last month, the Transport for the North board signed off its strategic transport plan, which calls for an ambitious and bold £70 billion programme of investment in the north’s transport networks. We also agreed the strategic outline business case for Northern Powerhouse Rail, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) just referred to, and which will better connect Sheffield, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Hull and Newcastle.

TfN’s plans are hugely significant, because they remind us of what we are working towards: a transport network that fully integrates all parts of the north, connects our people and businesses with opportunities both within and beyond our great towns and cities, and transforms our economy so that it works better for the 15 million residents of the north. I take the opportunity today to ask the Minister, when he responds to this debate, to say something about how the Government intend to resource those important plans. As he will know, leaders across the north have agreed to a plan that will make a meaningful and lasting difference, but we now need the Government to get behind it and support it.

The situation we find ourselves in is underpinned by a systemic unfairness in the way that the Treasury allocates funding for major projects. The current Green Book criteria used by Government are automatically skewed toward better-performing areas, because they naturally favour areas with lots of latent demand, but do not properly recognise that transport infrastructure is a stimulus for economic growth and supports the growth of new demand as well as being a response to existing demand.

Looking at the Government’s own figures, for every £1 of public infrastructure investment spent on transport across Yorkshire and the Humber, £3.20 is spent on London’s transport networks. I am not suggesting that London should have less spent on its transport infrastructure; not only would I be in big trouble with Mayor Sadiq Khan, but investment is critical in maintaining our capital city’s vital transport networks. What I am saying is that, across Britain’s regions, we simply have not had anywhere near enough of what is required to begin to address our economic challenges.

The Government have been talking a lot about issues surrounding regional inequality, industrial strategy, growth and productivity, but if we are not prepared to make investments on the scale that is needed, we will fail to meet the productivity challenge the Government have set. The second question I would like the Minister to address today is whether he will look at the Green Book criteria with his colleagues at the Treasury, so that he can satisfy himself that the funding allocation is fair.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I represent a small but beautiful island, and we are in exactly the same iniquitous position with Green Book funding.
Because we are an island, we cannot use Portsmouth or Southampton in our argument; they are the wrong side of the Solent. It is not only the hon. Gentleman’s area that suffers but mine as well.

**Dan Jarvis**: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, and I hope that the Minister will take the opportunity to discuss it with his Treasury colleagues. I met the Chancellor recently, and I know that he is keen to hear representations from people who share my view that the current system is not fair.

**Andrew Griffiths** (Burton) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. He is making some important points. As a midlander, I class my constituency as being northern. I will give him the hon. Gentleman some hope: we were able to secure more than £50 million of funding in my constituency to improve the A50. The Government put that money up and it is making a real difference. He is absolutely right about engaging with the Government and the Treasury. I am the proof of the pudding that the Government want to improve infrastructure in the north.

**Dan Jarvis**: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that. I hope other hon. Members take it as their cue to make similar representations on projects for which they seek funding, and I hope that the Government will give them the same support that they have given the hon. Gentleman.

I will make one final point on the importance of devolution. There is little point in giving regions the funding if we do not have the robust frameworks through which to decide where best to spend those resources. I know that my Yorkshire neighbour, the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), gives a huge amount of consideration to that. He knows, as I do, that there is great potential in Yorkshire. The Great Yorkshire Way shows the power that investment can have in unlocking possibilities for businesses and communities across our region.

We also know that political leaders in the north are ready, as they have shown in recent weeks and months, to work constructively together and with stakeholders to make a real difference. We have seen great enthusiasm for devolution in Yorkshire; not everyone in this room is entirely convinced, but I am working on them.

**Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. He tempts me on devolution. I am absolutely committed to devolution in Yorkshire, but we have to get the right type of devolution. He is a trailblazer with the city region devolution deal that he has struck with the Government. Does he agree that the best form of devolution to Yorkshire would be on a city region basis, the Government. Does he agree that the best form of devolution to Yorkshire would be on a city region basis, including to Sheffield, Leeds, Hull and York?

**Dan Jarvis**: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point, which he has made with consistency and clarity over a number of years. I always enjoy having that debate, as we will be having in Leeds on Friday, although I am not sure whether he will be there.

**Kevin Hollinrake**: I am not sure I’m invited.

**Dan Jarvis**: I extend an invitation to him. There is an important debate to be had about Yorkshire devolution, and I was pleased to meet not only the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government but the Government Chief Whip at Fountains Abbey on Friday to discuss it. I think we agree that there is an absolute requirement to move as quickly as possible to put in place a system of devolution that will best serve our great county. We may not be able to agree on precisely what that is today, but it is important that we reach agreement in the near future.

When thinking about regional transport infrastructure, we should be guided by the simple principle that we should connect our people to the places that they want to go for work, to access public services and for leisure, creating opportunities where we can and connecting people to them. That is how we give people a stake in their communities and in our country.

As we prepare for the future and life beyond the Brexit debate, all our regions and nations must be given the very best opportunity to contribute to our national prosperity. If we do not invest in regional transport infrastructure, we will not give the people we serve the tools they need to thrive, nor will we answer the concerns that motivated people to vote leave in the referendum. However, we can only do that if the Government support us. There are real opportunities before the Minister to help us to do that. I hope he takes them up.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Joan Ryan (in the Chair):** I am sure that Members can see how many people wish to speak. I suggest that, out of consideration for each other, Members limit their speeches to about three minutes. I will not impose a time limit; I will leave it to Members.

2.55 pm

**Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan, and to follow the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis). I thank him for securing the debate. I will touch briefly on devolution, which has proven to be the most intractable political situation in Yorkshire—much more so than Brexit—over the past five or 10 years. However, I am sure that there is a way forward, and I agree with the hon. Gentleman that it is crucial that we find it, so that we can properly exert our influence over central Government on hugely important matters, such as transport investment in our counties.

As the Chancellor admitted in his Budget speech in November 2016, no other major developed country has as large a productivity gap between its capital and its second and third cities as the UK. We are the most regionally imbalanced nation, which is a huge issue that we must deal with. London is 50% more productive than the regions of England—not only the north—and has 50% higher wages, on average, than the north. There is a direct correlation there. This is not about spending for spending’s sake; it is about the prosperity of the people we represent. There is no doubt that infrastructure spending has been disproportionately higher in the capital than in the regions, and redressing that imbalance will transform the economy right across the UK.

**Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that, in seeking to redress that imbalance, it is critical to present an ask, as it were, to the Department for Transport? When the Cheltenham cyber-park needed transport...
infrastructure, the Department provided £22 million, showing that, where there is a clear goal to improve infrastructure, it is keen to help where it can.

Kevin Hollinrake: I totally agree. I will come shortly to the clear ask, which has been set out for us by Transport for the North.

The Government are doing much. By 2021, infrastructure investment spending as a percentage of GDP will be at its highest for the last 30 years, while the national productivity investment fund will increase to £37 billion by 2023-24. The Government recognise that this is an issue. We must always make sure that we spend wisely and, in many cases, the minimum amount, because this is taxpayers’ money.

However, in my view there is a difference between recurrent spending—much of which is important but which we clearly have to keep under control, making sure that we run a surplus, rather than a deficit—and investment spending. A business would treat the two things differently in its accounts. Businesses have balance sheets and they also look at profit and loss. Investment spending goes on the balance sheet. We should look at investment spending in our regions in a completely different light from other types of spending, particularly in the north.

I support Transport for the North’s recent strategic plan. The hon. Member for Barnsley Central rightly referred to £3 being spent per capita in London for every £1 spent per capita in the north. However, it is not all to do with central Government spending or central allocations. Much of it is about local authority spending and private sector investment. It is important that we recognise that difference. Nevertheless, Transport for the North’s strategic transport plan sets out very clearly the £70 billion of spending needed between now and 2050, which would contribute an extra £100 billion gross value added to our economy and 850,000 jobs. That is a compelling case, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) referred to earlier.

Yes, part of it is about Northern Powerhouse Rail, which is so important to connect Liverpool to Manchester, to Bradford, to Leeds, to Hull and to Scarborough, and to go up into the north-east as well, but when that is delivered is also key. I would like my hon. Friend the Minister to consider, if possible, in his closing remarks the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for securing the clear ask, which has been set out for us by Transport for the North.

I again congratulate the hon. Member for Barnsley Central on initiating the debate. I look forward to listening to further contributions.

3 pm

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Ryan. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for securing this important debate.

Since becoming Lincoln’s MP, I have consistently been told that Lincoln’s transport infrastructure does not work effectively for those who use it. I am working hard with local stakeholders to create a vision of a better connected Lincoln. I wanted to know how residents thought that transport in Lincoln could be improved, so I did two things: I held a community engagement event, and I sent out a survey locally. The survey showed that people in Lincoln are currently not engaging with the public transport options available to them and therefore car travel is by far the most common way of travelling in the city. Residents expressed concerns about the value for money and punctuality of local transport. When I asked what would incentivise public transport use, “lower fares” was by far the most popular response. That is not surprising, because in the last year local bus fares in England have risen by 2.8%, increasing faster than wages and inflation.

The Government’s austerity agenda has meant that, since 2010, bus budgets have been cut by 45%, leading to thousands of routes being cut or withdrawn, and last year saw the lowest level of bus journeys per head on record. The concerns raised by my constituents reflect the fact that, under this Government, Lincolnshire’s transport infrastructure has consistently been neglected. Analysis last year by the Institute for Public Policy Research found that London was allocated more than three and a half times more transport funding per capita than the east midlands. My constituents deserve just as much investment as people living in London, but this Government have facilitated an unacceptable rise in regional inequalities.

Before the railways were privatised, our city had direct services to Birmingham, Coventry, Crewe and Chester. Those have all disappeared over the past 30 years. That is the logic of our fragmented and privatised public services: regional transport links become more unprofitable and are therefore discontinued. Shareholders are protected while people and our communities lose out.

Lincoln lacks the strategic service that might be expected for a city of its size. It has a very limited service to London and no east-west services running beyond Nottingham. Along with Lord Patrick Cormack, I have campaigned for the promise of extra trains from London to Lincoln later this year to be honoured, and we are keeping our fingers crossed on that one, but there are currently no clear plans for the improvement of east-west services beyond Nottingham.

Local stakeholders unanimously agree that electrification of the joint line between Peterborough, Spalding, Lincoln and Doncaster would be hugely beneficial in improving our regional interconnectivity, but a Network Rail report last year predicted that any upgrades were not to be expected until after the 2030s, once HS2 has been completed. I can see the benefit of improving transport to and from London, but I think that this Government often forget that not every journey in the UK goes through our capital.

Over the past 20 years there have been relatively few changes to Lincolnshire’s rail network, and almost no service enhancements or changes to the rolling stock. Economic modelling by the Greater Lincolnshire local enterprise partnership indicated that improvements in rail services would lead to substantial benefits to our regional and national economy. Merely bringing existing services up to Network Rail’s “good” standard could bring about a £34 million increase in GDP per year, and improvements in line with the best equivalent services in the UK could be worth as much as £167 million. That
shows that investing in our regional transport infrastructure can set in motion a virtuous cycle of prosperity that benefits commuters, businesses and residents, but the Government refuse to recognise that.

It is clear that this Government have consistently neglected Lincolnshire’s transport infrastructure, along with every other region outside London. Like many of my colleagues, I will continue to work hard to deliver improvements that are in line with the wants and needs of my local community, but it is difficult to do that when we have one hand tied behind our back by a fragmented, shareholder-driven, privatised system and the other hand tied by a Government who refuse to distribute transport investment fairly across all regions of the UK.

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): The two Opposition Front-Bench spokespeople have kindly agreed to reduce their time to seven minutes each, which gives us an extra six minutes, but that still puts pressure on, so I just remind right hon. and hon. Members to be considerate.

3.4 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this important debate, won by the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), on investment in regional transport infrastructure. I believe that there is a powerful good news story on this. It is not unalloyed, not perfect, not quite as good as we would like it to be, but it is still very positive overall. When I was growing up in Liverpool, we used to be able to look over at Runcorn bridge. Runcorn bridge had not been upgraded—it had been over capacity for decades. That was the result of under-investment by Governments of both colours. It was fantastic to see the Mersey Gateway being delivered, a £1.2 billion investment—

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Green: I will not take an intervention because of the time constraints, but I share the hon. Gentleman’s concern about the tolls that have been put on the bridge. I would rather that had not been done, because it is a major local concern. However, that upgrade should have been delivered decades ago.

We also have Liverpool2—a £400 million investment in the docks. That is an immense commitment from a private company, but there is an understanding that, economically, the country is going in the right direction. A company has to have confidence in the future of the country, the economic prosperity of the country and the manufacturing in the country in order to invest £400 million in a new docks system, and I understand that it wants to upgrade that further.

It is very positive that electrification has gone ahead between Liverpool and Manchester. The project is ongoing between Manchester and Preston. It has suffered too many delays, which are very disappointing for my commuters. However, the hon. Member for Barnsley Central was right to highlight that this is not just about connecting cities; it is about connecting communities, such as Blackrod, Horwich and Lostock in my constituency. The electrification project will join them together or provide an enhanced service once it is completed.

People are looking into extending the tram-train system out to Hag Fold, Atherton and Daisy Hill, which would be a further advantage for my constituents, making them better connected and making work more accessible. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will maintain his focus on—and ensure that the Government’s focus is on—the central importance of the northern powerhouse. Fundamentally, it is about connectivity. It is about having that wealth of talent in the north-west, and indeed across the north of England, and ensuring that those in that pool of talent can work together, so that we can attract the best businesses and give our young people the best opportunities.

3.7 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I will try desperately hard to confine my comments to just three minutes. I would like to start by being kind to the Minister and thanking him for his personal support in getting the A63 project working in Hull. That has been 20 years coming—for 20 years it has been a battle to get the bridge built and the A63 work done. I am thanking the Minister partly because I want that support and help to continue until the project is completely finished—I hope to buy myself some favours there.

Hull does have a bright future. In 2017 it was the UK city of culture, described as “a city coming out of the shadows”. Some people describe that as the end of the line, but I say it was just the beginning, because what better place could there be to start than in the city of Hull? To keep that going and stop talent leaving our city—to enable people to stay there, live there, work there, be successful and reach their potential—we desperately need more money for our infrastructure; for our roads and railways. The Minister is already supporting us with the roads, so I will comment briefly on the need to support us with the railway. I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), is coming up to Hull to look at the railway.

I fully support what my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) said about Transport for the North’s proposal and the desperate need for Northern Powerhouse Rail to link up with Hull. We desperately need a direct service from Hull all the way through to Manchester City airport. We would also like more frequent trains to go through to Leeds. Some constituents living in my city work in Leeds, and they now feel compelled to move to Leeds because of the problems with the transport links and infrastructure. I want to press the Minister on that.

I also want to press the Minister for a little more cash, please, but for a different road this time: Calvert Lane in Hull, which is in desperate need of complete remodelling. The ongoing work on the A63, which I am eternally grateful for, as he knows, has created additional pressure and traffic chaos at times in the city, and also huge problems with air pollution. Hull bid for the transforming cities fund but was unsuccessful, so if the Minister could look kindly upon Hull again and perhaps reach down the back of the sofa and find us some more cash for Calvert Lane, I would be very grateful for that as well.

Hull has a great future, but the money needed for our transport infrastructure is desperately overdue, and what better time to start giving us more cash than today?
Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for securing this genuinely important debate. I shall be brief. I apologise for being a bit late, Ms Ryan.

First, I would love Ministers to look at the ferry duopoly on the Solent. It is the most expensive ferry route in the world, and many issues that relate to the ownership of the two ferry companies are not necessarily in the public interest and help to sustain the very high fares that Islanders are forced to pay. There is also the issue of the debt that is loaded on to at least one of those companies.

Secondly, Island Line is not the longest railway line in the world, but it is nevertheless the line from Ryde Pier Head down to Shanklin, which is very important for Islanders. I am grateful to the Minister for his Ministry's kind support in pledging to rebuild Ryde railway pier. However, there is foot-dragging on the priced option for Island Line. The amounts of money are tiny compared with the very large sums going to other regions. At the moment, travelling on Island Line is almost the rail equivalent of travelling in a Land Rover over a reasonably rough bridleway. It needs significant infrastructure work on the track, signalling and rolling stock.

There was something approaching uproar when we learnt that Newcastle's rolling stock was 40 years old. Without sounding like something out of a Monty Python sketch, I would give for rolling stock that is 40 years old! We have 10 Northern line carriages from 1938. As part of the modernisation for the priced option, if the Minister is generous enough, we will get refurbished 40-year-old rolling stock, which we will be more than happy with—it will be 41 years younger than the 81-year-old rolling stock we currently have. I hope I can press my hon. Friend the Minister to be generous.

Finally, I want to mention Southern railway. I really hope that HS2 is not diverting funds to every other rail project in the country. We should have proceeded with HS3, the northern high-speed railway, which is, as the Americans say, a no-brainer; rather than build a £100 billion route from London to Birmingham, which I am not sure we need—perhaps some of my colleagues disagree. Because of that, I am concerned that the main line routes to Portsmouth and Southampton will not get the attention they deserve. What I find most staggering is the speed of the London to Portsmouth express train service: currently 47 miles an hour, which is slower than it was in the 1920s. Will the Minister look at some of the examples of where a little bit of impetus from him and the Department for Transport would reap real benefits for our economy in the Southampton-Portsmouth conurbation, and especially in my constituency?

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Ryan, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on securing the debate.

I chair the all-party group on the east of England. Although I fully understand the arguments made by colleagues about disparities in regional funding, and I know that some will argue that the south in general does well, I ask people to look a little deeper, particularly at the east. The east of England region has enjoyed significant growth over the years and is a net contributor to the Treasury, with great innovation hubs, but there are substantial challenges, almost all based around transport and housing. Despite considerable effort in different parts of the region, that continues to be a struggle. I pay tribute to those who developed the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough independent economic review, but still the answers often depend on unlocking the investment levers that sit in the Treasury.

I want to flag up a couple of positive suggestions that might help. Since coming to the House, I have strongly supported the London Stansted Cambridge Consortium and the West Anglia Taskforce, which has made a powerful case for rail improvements in the corridor, including sections of four-tracking. The case remains strong, but there are still considerable challenges to achieving it, so it is worth looking at other options.

I have been told that digital signalling across the eastern region could make a huge difference. The cost is £1 billion—a lot of money—and this does not necessarily make old, unreliable infrastructure any more reliable, but it can make better use of what we have. I am told that it could increase reliability and frequency, such that it could take up to 10 to 12 minutes off the Stansted to Liverpool Street journey: completely transformative in terms of our transport connections within the region.

For understandable reasons, I take Cambridge to be the centre of our transport hubs within the region, and I want to see better connectivity to the east. I also want to look west, having already looked south. There is much debate about the Cambridge-Milton Keynes-Oxford corridor, or CaMK Ox, as it is likely to be called. To make the best use of it we will need much better regional co-ordination, but observers as esteemed as Sir John Armitt have pointed out that the plethora of organisations along the arc makes that extremely difficult.

I am grateful to England’s Economic Heartland, which has suggested that a geographically-specific national policy statement might be considered. Such statements were established by the Planning Act 2008 and are introduced for major projects. It might be innovative to use a geographically-specific NPS to bring together infrastructure requirements, but that is not without precedent and there is a sound legal basis. As a member of the Transport Committee that looked in detail at the Heathrow NPS, I really can see the value of such a process. I would welcome the Minister's comments on that suggestion.

As we see the northern powerhouse, the midlands engine and other regions of the country come together to campaign on these issues, it is clear that this is a question not just of investment, but of how the investment is made. I do not want to see the south and the east get left behind in this new world.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak, Ms Ryan, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on securing this important debate.

The figures are plain to see, and I am afraid I cannot agree with the hon. Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths). I am sure the level of investment in the year '50 was wonderful; it certainly is not in the year '19. My issue for the Minister is fairness. We have seen tables produced by the Library detailing the inequalities in investment
Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on bringing the matter forward.

We all know that a rising tide floats all ships, and certainly investing in infrastructure means that all the businesses in the vicinity are winners. Declining to invest in infrastructure means retaining a situation where rural communities are socially isolated, contributing to over-reliance on towns. The main town in my constituency, Newtownards, lies just short of 10 miles from Belfast City airport—the journey takes less than 20 minutes—but I fear that my town does not benefit as it should from proximity to the airport, and the business and tourism that that should attract. I believe that is due to a lack of correct infrastructure in relation to the airport.

Whenever I have put questions to the Minister—I am always talking about connectivity with Belfast City airport or Belfast International airport—he has responded positively about the need for connectivity, but I want to emphasise this again. If we were to invest in the strengthening of routes directly from airports, that would allow businessmen to reach cheaper rental accommodation in Newtownards and other towns, and the local economy would benefit.

Another issue in my constituency is the coastal erosion programme. There are many roads around the Ards peninsula where I live, and in the centre of the constituency, where high tides and the weather conditions cause a lot of erosion, yet the methodology for responding seems to be reactive rather than proactive. I do not fault the Department, but I ask that we look for future aspirational projects that could address the issues. Northern Ireland is at the bottom of the table in relation to spend per head throughout the United Kingdom. There is an historic lack of infrastructure. I do not want to insult anyone’s intelligence in this place, but of course the fact is that over 30-odd years there was a campaign in which the IRA destroyed everything it could, including as many places as it could.

We have moved on, thank the Lord, but when I look at my local towns’ potential and the state-of-the-art office space, UK-wide connectivity and low business rates, it is clear that while short-term issues must be addressed, so must the long-term goal of showing the world that Northern Ireland is the place to invest in business. It is the place to produce television shows and locate a high-class graduate labour force, as well as an abundance of admin staff. It is the cyber-security region for the whole United Kingdom, and we have more people employed in that work. That is an example of what we are doing right.

One of the keys to unlock global attraction is the ability to connect easily, both globally and UK-wide, and we simply have not yet come close to unlocking that potential. I would like an extension of the city deals, which the Minister will be aware of, although he is not directly responsible for them. Last night, the stronger towns plan was put forward, and those projects will link towns and cities to the markets that are available. This place is where action must be spearheaded, and I look to the Minister to understand how and when that can be done.

3.23 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I shall be brief. The good news for the Minister is that, on the basis of what I am about to say, he can remind me that all I have said is the responsibility of the Scottish Government. However, I think I am duty-bound to raise the issues, partly on behalf of my constituents, but, secondarily and in a wider context, as a cautionary tale.

Some weeks ago, my wife and I had occasion to catch the ScotRail service from Inverness to Edinburgh. ScotRail has become something of a national sad and bad joke in Scotland. I think I speak for all Scottish Members when I say we are deeply critical of the appalling standard of service—to call it the standard of service that we enjoy would be to use the wrong verb. On that particular train, I happened to notice as we took our seats—by the way, seat reservation does not work on ScotRail for some reason—I noticed that the toilet was marked as out of order. I thought quickly, and I shall explain why in a moment, and went down the train to see whether the other one was working. I discovered that it was also out of order. There were only two toilets on the train, although it wasembarking on a long journey.

I kind of threw my weight about, for which I apologise to hon. Members: I got hold of the guard and said, “Really, you cannot leave and go all the way from Inverness to Edinburgh with no toilets working.” The staff were helpful and it is not them I blame, not one little bit. They got the toilet working. We hear about
trolleys being cancelled, toilets not working and trains being cancelled. It is a shambles, and that is the cautionary tale for the UK Government. I hope to goodness that our letters to Nicola Sturgeon and Michael Matheson will have some effect. The best thing would be for the contract to be changed—got rid of.

My second point is about the Stagecoach X99 bus service and a letter that appeared in last week’s John O’Groat Journal:

“I am temporarily disabled following a fall. Last week I took the…bus from Edinburgh with comfortable seats, hot drinks and snacks. There was a ‘new bus’ from Inverness to Wick. It is the worst-designed vehicle ever. The entrance step did not lower. There were no grab-bars at the door to pull myself up, then a steep and narrow stair, impossible for me. Access to the driver was impeded and awkward. Other folk told me the upstairs seats are most uncomfortable.

For disabled people there were three cramped, narrow seats behind the driver. Access to the toilet was up the impossible stairs, then down again to the loo—and back again. It was too much for the third disabled passenger who soaked the velvet seat.

Stagecoach has a full fleet of these for the X99 service. All of our representatives… I dare you to take a trip on one. Then have them taken off the road.

Nancy Nicolson, Loch Street, Wick”.

There is a letter in this week’s issue, which I shall not read out in full, but it begins:

“… I am in total agreement with Nancy Nicolson who wrote… that these so-called double-decker coaches are not designed for use on public service”.

For Stagecoach, a company owned by Sir Brian Souter, to get a fundamental design so badly wrong, particularly for disabled people, appals me. I mentioned the train because my wife is disabled, and when I am not with her in the north of Scotland she has to take the bus, unless she can get a friend to drive her, to go to hospital appointments in Inverness, for example. When I think of her having to scale the stairs to get to the toilet—it is all very well, travelling on a long-distance coach in Europe, but in the highlands, when the bus goes around the twists and bends and up and down hills, it is not funny trying to negotiate that. I thank you for being patient with me, Ms Ryan, but I speak with some passion on the matter.

I accept that Scotland is not alone in lagging behind in investment in transport infrastructure, which is a problem that other regions and nations of the UK face. Just look at the level of integration and improvement in London’s transport system compared with the often disjointed and under-invested transport systems in other areas of the country. That is what a lack of investment means in reality: transport systems in some parts of the country that cannot modernise their infrastructure, integrate their services or meet the needs of communities.

I look at the state of infrastructure in my constituency. We have ongoing problems with the Shawhead flyover, and a lack of proper road markings and filter lights is causing real safety concerns. There is a continued lack of reliable services for passengers on the Stepps to Gartcosh railway line. Other areas in my constituency, such as Chryston and Moodiesburn, are suffering from a reduction in bus services as a result of under-investment, and some areas such as Cardowan have virtually no bus services at all.

In Thorniewood, the ward where I am a councillor, the local bus service linking Viewpark, Tannochside and Birkenshaw with Uddingston town had been running since the days of tram cars, but now it has no service. That has cut off many schools, local factories such as Tunnock’s and the local doctors, leaving many people having to walk miles or take taxis, which are unaffordable. I am holding a public meeting on this issue. It does not just affect Scotland; it is present across the country, and we need further investment.

Several hon. Members rose—

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): Order. I will call the Front-Bench spokesperson for the SNP at 3.35 pm.

3.30 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I will be brief, Ms Ryan. For transport, we in the far south-west need four things, plus one wraparound thing, which is to find our voice. I am disappointed that more of the south-west blue team are not here to add their voices to my four asks, because these are cross-party issues and I implore the Minister to take them seriously.

The first ask is to ensure that our railway is fast and resilient. The £80 million for Dawlish is a good start, but it requires £300 million and we need the remaining money. Secondly, we must ensure that we capitalise on growth in cruise travel by having a new cruise terminal at Mill Bay that will bring tourists into Plymouth and create more jobs and investment, especially in the lead-up to Mayflower 2020 and the 400th anniversary of the sailing of the Mayflower from Plymouth.

The third point is the extension of the M5 from Exeter to Plymouth, which will provide a safer road with more capacity. The final point is the reopening of Plymouth airport. It closed in 2010, and we are one of a few cities in the country where aviation capacity has been lost. Huge potential can be realised by reopening Plymouth airport, and I hope that after the planning inspectors have made their decision, the Minister will meet me and representatives from Plymouth City Council to see what we can do together, collectively and on a cross-party basis to restore aviation links to Plymouth so that we get our airport back and address the structural underfunding that we in the far south-west have had for far too long.
regulation has not been achieved, and there is a major issue. There are still no efforts to address that major issue. Bus system and the railways—but also because strategic regional planning powers were inadvertently taken away. We must redouble our efforts to improve the city that they love and in which they live.

Richard Thomson: Thank you, Ms Ryan. To compress the municipal transport system of the entire city of Glasgow into that time will be quite a challenge.

As a cautionary tale for some of those embarking on new devolution projects and city region planning, let me say that it is important to get the balance right because it involves devolving not just financial decision making, but the proper integrated planning of transport policy. Consider the history of municipal transport development in Glasgow. We started 40 years ago with the best urban integrated transport system in the UK, but we now have one of the worst and most fragmented. Why did that happen? Municipal transport structures and planning in Glasgow have been fragmented, partly because of privatisation—including of the municipal bus system and the railways—but also because strategic regional planning powers were inadvertently taken away by devolution, and such issues became merged with the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government. Indicative regional planning of the transport system has failed miserably over the past 30 years or so, and we need a much more robust and integrated way of doing things.

When considering how to create a devolved regional structure, we need the opportunity to rebalance productivity and investment in our city regions. Those are the things that will change our economic promise across the country, driven by our major city regions. Those are the issues we must address, and perhaps Glasgow can stand as an example. We must redouble our efforts to improve the city’s regional planning and transport infrastructure. There has been no major railway expansion in the urban metro railway system over the past 20 years, and there are still no efforts to address that major issue. Bus regulation has not been achieved, and there is a major issue of car dependency, particularly in some of the poorest communities in the UK and Glasgow, where people do not have the average access to car ownership. That is creating a severe problem of social dislocation.

If we invest properly in our city regions, with the proper integrated planning powers associated with that, we will be in a much better position than we are currently. We must reverse the clock and relearn some of the old lessons.

Given that at least three Scottish Members have contributed today, it would be remiss of me not to refer to the investment that the Scottish Government have been making, as they have steadfastly invested in transport infrastructure in Scotland. Indeed, as the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) will know, since 2007 the SNP has invested £20 billion in transport infrastructure and services, including the largest road investment programme Scotland has ever seen. I am more than happy to have a conversation about where that additional money for transport will come from, and it is regrettable that the Scottish Labour party did not engage in the budget process that we in Scotland have just been through. Perhaps it will next year.

Let me focus on some of the projects that we have invested in. There is the Queensferry crossing over the Forth estuary and the dualling of the A9 all the way from Perth to Inverness—I am sorry that the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) is not in his place to hear that. We are about to dual the A96 from Inverness to Aberdeen, completing the Aberdeen western peripheral route. There is the Borders Railway—Scottish Conservative Members are normally desperate to talk about the SNP Government, but I note that the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) is not here to talk about that wonderful investment by the SNP Government. There is the electrification of the rail link along the central belt, and an extension to the national concessionary travel scheme. I was speaking to my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard). He turns 60 tomorrow and is very excited to receive his new bus pass, which he will be using. We wish him well with that.

I wish also to reflect on investment in my constituency over the years. The M74 motorway extension was spoken about for many years in Scotland, and it was delivered eight months ahead of schedule and millions of pounds under budget. The extension of the Airdrie to Bathgate railway will be the most significant transport investment in my constituency, which will use Coatbridge, Shettleston, Garrowhill or Easterhouse stations, because they can now go directly to Edinburgh, which is great news. There was the upgrading of the A8 to a motorway.
For those of us who travel to Airdrie—great Airdrie fans that we are—our journey time to go and see the Diamonds is even faster.

In Glasgow, I would like the east end regeneration route to be completed, including from Parkhead Forge to the M8 motorway. I am disappointed that the previous council took that off the city deal plans, but perhaps it will return. On the subject of stalled spaces, alongside my colleague John Mason, I would like a train station in Parkhead. It has a vibrant retail environment, whether that is the Forge shopping centre, the Forge retail park, the Forge market, or Scotland’s largest football stadium, Celtic Park, with its capacity of 64,000 people. Parkhead needs a train station, and my message to Network Rail is that it should consider the successes of Bridgeton and Dalmarnock. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) has arrived, and she will have seen the benefits of the high footfall there.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The investment in Dalmarnock railway station has been marked. It went from being the lowest used station on the Strathclyde Partnership for Transport network, to a brand new, state-of-the-art station built for the Commonwealth games. Does my hon. Friend agree that there are still challenges for stations such as Bridgeton, which need lift access so that people can get in and out more easily?

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): Order. This has been a very busy debate with huge pressure on time. I do not think it is acceptable to come in so close to the end of the debate and be given an intervention. It is not fair on other Members.

David Linden: Thank you, Ms Ryan. It is always a pleasure to have an intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who is an assiduous campaigner for her constituents. She is absolutely right to place on the record the need to ensure that our train stations are accessible for those constituents who have a disability. I hope that the funding that has been made available from the UK Government can be extended. There are far too many train stations, not only in Glasgow but across the country, where it is frankly abysmal for people.

On the issue of passenger figures, I am grateful to Clyde Gateway for furnishing me with information. Because of investment in Dalmarnock and Bridgeton in my hon. Friend’s constituency, passenger numbers have risen by 157%, which is obviously a good thing for the local economy. We have seen a lot of investment in the Clyde Gateway area, which I want to see continue, but I would also like to see a bit of investment around the Parkhead area, which would bring huge benefits to my constituents. Unashamedly make that case to Network Rail.

3.40 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under you in the Chair, Ms Ryan.

We have had fantastic contributions from the north, south, east and west of the country, with hon. Members making representations and airing grievances. I am sure that the Minister will respond to all of those. I want to start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), who has brought forward a really exciting, multi-modal approach to transport in south Yorkshire. He proposes a transport system connecting people and places, taking the Sheffield city region through to 2040 with his ambition for transport there, and ensuring that transport is the servant and not the master of the local economy.

We know that we need to develop housing and industry around our transport system, so that transport can be sown into a modern, sustainable and accessible process, in order to move people around. This is about productivity and social inclusion. We have heard what a stimulus that can be for our modern economy.

We have seen the power of devolution in places such as Manchester and London. We want to see that across the whole of Yorkshire. However, devolution has to mean a real emphasis on moving resources, power and decision making, and not just lip service, so that regions can determine their own destiny.

The transport brief is about clear, strategic objectives. However, there are some really important things missing and areas where greater focus is needed from the Government. I want to highlight the decarbonisation of our transport system. We have a carbon crisis at the moment. Transport comprises between 29% and 32% of all carbon emissions in the UK, and we want to reduce our carbon emissions by 15% year on year.

The catastrophic road building project and the cancellation of rail electrification show that the Government are moving in the wrong direction. They are adding to the carbon footprint, rather than reducing it. In my city, 50,000 people each year lose their lives due to poor air quality. That is a national crisis and it must be addressed as such.

Chris Green: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachael Maskell: I am sorry, I do not have time.

I want to see a focus on decarbonisation and decongestion as a priority for my city of York. Over the next 12 months, Labour’s citizens and transport commission will achieve that.

We have heard about inequality of spending across the country. The north-east has the worst levels of investment. That must change. It was also interesting to hear about the need for greater investment on the Isle of Wight, which shows that our infrastructure needs to be brought up to the modern era.

When we are making these investments, we have to plan for our railway system over a 30 to 40 year period—the length of time our infrastructure is sustained. Therefore, we need to ensure not only that the infrastructure is right, but that we have the skills to serve the infrastructure. While the Government have issued great plans around energy, construction and the transport system for future engineering projects, I say to the Minister—I am sure he has had similar conversations himself—that we are facing a skills cliff edge at the moment, given our ageing demographic and Brexit. The industry is doubtful that the infrastructure projects mentioned will be delivered. At the same time, there is a draw-down into the south-east, which means that we may not see the development across the country that we want.

We are seriously concerned about the emphasis on road building as opposed to moving forward into modern transport systems, bringing about modal shift, and
ensuring that people are moving from their cars to public transport and to active travel for local journeys, which constitute 80% of journeys. We need to focus on a modern system, such as exists in Strasbourg, Copenhagen and much of the Netherlands. That is the kind of ambition that Labour has, and why we believe that we will deliver strongly in the transport brief.

We also recognise that there have been some good initiatives. The tram-train project in Sheffield has taken forward a mechanism of good, clean energy for the future. Importantly, it serves not only the city, but the more rural areas. As has been mentioned, this is about drawing in people from the towns and wider conurbations, so that people can get to work and travel for leisure. That is so important.

Opposition Members spoke about bus services. The Government’s profit-driven bus plan—I use the word “plan” lightly—does not deliver for the public. We believe that buses should be brought under public control. When we look at places such as Reading, where we see an increase in patronage and a service that meets the needs of residents, day and night, we can see what is possible when bus services are integrated into economic development. There are powerful testimonies to that from elsewhere. Coaches never get a mention, but I want to mention them, because they can also form part of a modal shift and bring rapid change. I believe that we must explore all options.

The trans-Pennine route was mentioned yet again. I say to the Minister that it is really important at this stage to scope out the work for the full electrification project, and to ensure that the scope includes opportunity for future freight. Labour will electrify that line and ensure that freight is deliverable on it. Speaking of freight—which, again, has not been mentioned yet—it is important that we build a freight system for the future, putting as much freight as we can on to rail and ensuring that all long-distance journeys are accessible, reliable and timely for freight. Therefore, we need to see a real move in that direction, as well as investment in urban consolidation centres, which will enable us to stop heavy goods vehicles travelling into town centres.

Finally, I want to touch on inter-modal connectivity. Joining everything up is really important. We have been quite startled by the fact that HS2 is being placed at Curzon Street, as opposed to New Street, meaning that people will have to trundle through the middle of Birmingham, I am sure that might be an advantage to Birmingham, but it does not really address the connectivity that is needed. We need to ensure that there is good connectivity across all transport modes. We expect the Government to look again at the way that they have put transport into silos. Labour believes that inter-modal connectivity and moving people more on to public transport is the way forward, and that is what we will deliver in government.

3.48 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): It is an absolute pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Ryan. I am not a huge reader of Tom Clancy, but I think that Jack Ryan could take your correspondence course when it comes to bravery in public office, so thank you very much indeed. I congratulate my friend the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on securing the debate, and all hon. Members who participated in the wide-ranging conversation.

I know that the hon. Member for Barnsley Central, with his mayoral hat on, will hope, as do the Department and I, that he will be able to complete the devolution deal that he has in mind for the Sheffield city region, releasing powers and funding. Although I know that is not always the position held on the Government Benches, we have been working closely with him on that. As he said, transport is essential for prosperity, growth and wellbeing across the whole country. We recognise that good transport infrastructure is absolutely essential to productivity. That point was well made by my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who highlighted the productivity gap in this country. That means delivering new infrastructure, from strategic and regional priorities all the way down to the local level. I will touch on all of those levels, while addressing as many of the points that have been raised by hon. Members as I can.

As hon. Members will know, in 2017 the Government published a very ambitious transport investment strategy, setting out our ambition to build a stronger and more balanced economy within the industrial strategy more widely, and responding to local growth priorities. That has conditioned the investments we have made ever since.

On the road side—hon. Members know that I am the roads Minister—we have invested heavily in existing transport infrastructure and new schemes, with some £15 billion being spent through road investment strategy 1 between 2015 and 2020. In the 2018 Budget the Government published objectives for road investment strategy 2, which will run from 2020 to 2025 and include £25.3 billion to be made available to further develop and improve the strategic road network. We are developing an affordable and deliverable investment plan for RIS2, which will be published later this year.

I could not help noticing that the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) was extremely rude about road building and called it catastrophic. Does that constitute a change of policy on the part of the whole Labour party? I encourage her not to think of it in that way, because road investment strategy 2 not only includes hundreds of millions of pounds for cycling and walking schemes and an enormous investment in skills, which she cares very much about, but paves the ways for autonomous and electric vehicles, which will be the vehicle—if I may use the pun—for the decarbonisation and greening of our economy in the longer term.

Kevin Hollinrake: Will the Minister give way?

Jesse Norman: I do not have time; I apologise.

In the 2018 Budget we also provided a top-up of £420 million for local roads, particularly to repair potholes. A share of £3.5 billion of the national roads fund over five years from 2020-21 will fund improvements in the middle tier of the country’s busiest and most economically important local authority A roads, such as the A66, which connects Cumbria to the north-east. I have made no secret of the fact that, in the spending review, I am pressing for a local roads settlement that follows a similar five-year pattern so that local authorities have
[Jesse Norman]

more visibility and more capacity to make strategic decisions at a level that is, hopefully, at least as good as the present one.

Of course, we are not just investing in the strategic road network; we are continually investing in upgrades and improvements to rail, including £1 billion that has been invested so far in the great north rail project and £3 billion that will be spent over the next few years to improve rail journeys between Manchester, Huddersfield, Leeds and York. Every train on the Northern and TransPennine networks will be new or modernised by 2020.

On Northern Powerhouse Rail, the strategic outline business case has been received and is under review. We expect to develop a response to it in close co-operation with partners across the north. It has been suggested that scrapping HS2 is the best way to secure Northern Powerhouse Rail, but that is naive, if I may say so. The Government’s commitment remains unchanged. HS2 is one of the keys to developing Northern Powerhouse Rail, not least because Northern Powerhouse Rail trains will use HS2 infrastructure, including on the approach to Manchester and between Sheffield and Leeds. That may mean that HS2 infrastructure will have to be built first, as a priority, before NPR can be implemented on those stretches.

Rightly, active travel has been mentioned and has been a focus of the debate. The hon. Member for York Central spoke about mode shift, and I could not agree more—I spoke at the Modeshift awards earlier today. It involves investment in air quality, cycling and walking schemes, our new road to zero strategy and the future of mobility. We are heavily involved in all those things.

We have published a cycling and walking investment strategy, which sets out ambitions for 2040. So far we have made £1 billion available to local bodies over the next five years to invest in local cycling and walking schemes. We have supported 46 local authorities on specific schemes that they have in mind. I share the view of the hon. Member for Barnsley Central that we are planting an active travel commissioner. I take my hat off to Chris Boardman and to the other highly engaged local teams at mayoral authorities that are making transformative differences.

There is a question about the city versus town balance. Recent Government initiatives, such as the future high streets fund and the stronger towns fund, which was just announced, have tried to recognise that. That city focus has been well picked up by mayoral authorities, however, and in Manchester we have invested £250 million through the transforming cities fund, of which £160 million is going on cycling and walking schemes through the transformative Beelines project.

There are concerns about regional investment. There cannot be much doubt that successive Governments have under-invested in the north, which we recognise. However, we are investing in the north not just because of that, but because it is the right thing to do and it is essential to our future productivity as a nation.

The hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) rightly mentioned perceptions of unfairness. He is probably more sophisticated than I am in looking at the specific regional variations, as he will be aware, but it is a highly encouraging sign overall.

I will crack on in the few minutes I have left, because I want to leave some time for the hon. Member for Barnsley Central to reply. At a regional level, we have supported sub-nation transport bodies, which are important from our point of view, particularly in the production of a regional evidence base for our major road network. Hon. Members will know about the transformative move that took place on 1 April 2018, when Transport for the North became a statutory body. It is not just about the north; the Government have been clear that investment in the south-west is also important to that region’s economy, as the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) touched on. That is why we have just published “Investing in the South West”, building on ambitious plans to grow the region’s economy.

The hon. Member for Barnsley Central rightly said that there has been a lot of focus on cities. I have mentioned three obvious ways in which we have tried to address that head-on: first, through devolution deals and wider city regions; secondly, through the £2.5 billion transforming cities fund; and thirdly, through the new stronger towns fund and the future high streets fund, which comprise nearly £1.3 billion.

The future of mobility is of great importance. We are thinking hard about how to improve mobility, which does not just mean the autonomous and electric vehicles that will require higher quality road surfaces and that underpin the need for continued road investment. It also involves the £150 million that we have invested in Transport for the North for smart and integrated ticketing and the investment we have made in future mobility zones across the west midlands.

In the minute remaining, I will quickly pick up on some of the points raised by hon. Members. The hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), who is no longer here, which is a pity, asked whether we were dragging our feet on western rail links to Heathrow. The answer is absolutely not. The consultation concluded in June 2018 and Network Rail intends to submit proposals for planning powers later this year.

My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) asked a whole host of questions—I wish I could respond to all of them. I have looked closely at the Green Book and think there is still work to be done on it. Frankly, in many ways the Treasury takes a Department for Transport lead on it, precisely to get away from an overly financialised or economic view. We have a five-case model, which includes environmental impacts and others. If hon. Members would like to come and discuss with officials how that works in specific cases, I would be happy to curate a roundtable or something of that kind.

A question was asked about the fragmentation of transport, which is always a concern and something that the Williams review is looking at. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is no longer here, made a point about connectivity. I could not agree with him more. The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) expressed her gratitude.
I remind her of the definition of gratitude in “Yes Minister”, which is, “a lively expectation of favours to come”.

3.58 pm

Dan Jarvis: It has been a wide-ranging debate and I am grateful to all hon. Members who have contributed. There has been general agreement on the importance of active travel. Perhaps the Minister might consider appointing a country-wide active travel commissioner.

Jesse Norman: Already in progress.

Dan Jarvis: I am delighted to hear that, because it will provide an important opportunity to join up the good work that is taking place across the country.

The point about the Green Book criteria might sound niche, but it is vital. I am pleased that the Minister has made a commitment to meet hon. Members to discuss the detail of those criteria. I look forward to that opportunity.

The point I want to end on is that the architecture and governance around the decisions that underpin transport infrastructure is a crowded field; lots of different organisations and stakeholders are involved, from national Government and the Department to Network Rail, combined mayoral authorities and local authorities. In the north, however, the landscape has changed recently with Transport for the North, which is doing an important job well and is well led. It has successfully established a consensus among leaders. Northern Powerhouse Rail’s strategic outline business case and the strategic transport plan show us that we can do it. We just need the Government to allocate the resources to underpin the plans that have been agreed in the north.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Solar Industry

[Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair]

4 pm

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

That this House has considered the effect on the solar industry of the replacement of the feed-in tariff.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am pleased to have secured this important debate. The Minister knows that I have been focused on this issue for a number of months now. The solar industry is reeling from the announcement that the feed-in tariff scheme is to close. The scheme was a huge success, with solar panels installed on nearly 1 million homes since it was launched in 2010. However, the loss of such a successful programme has led to a substantial loss of confidence in the sector. Between 30% and 40% of firms are contemplating closure, and international figures are considering pulling out of the UK market.

The news about the scheme came on top of a business rates rise and caused a huge degree of apprehension in the sector. If that apprehension turns into something more substantial, the loss of firms on the scale suggested would be hugely damaging to the sector, the wider economy and our efforts to tackle climate change.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this important debate. Does she recognise that this sector is not just about profit-making firms; it is also about charitable and community organisations? In my constituency, for example, they make money from solar farms to help fund youth centre services and other community outreach activities. This is also an issue for their funding sustainability.

Antoinette Sandbach: I absolutely agree, and I hope the Minister will say something about community schemes in her response, because there are many different ways of installing and making the best of solar power, as the hon. Gentleman has just indicated, and its flexibility has been one of the reasons why it has been taken up so quickly.

I was talking about the damage to the solar industry. One firm in my constituency, near the village of Malpas, closed once the restrictions on the existing feed-in tariff schemes were imposed. I hope that was a one-off and not a sign of things to come.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech about the benefits of the feed-in tariff scheme and why it ought to be maintained. However, does she recognise that there are flaws in the way it has been applied, particularly in relation to the green deal scheme, such that many people were mis-sold feed-in tariffs and have been severely financially affected by the issue, including many of my constituents and others across the UK? The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy still has to address that through the Green Deal Finance Company.

Antoinette Sandbach: I am aware of the issue. I think those people were misled at the point of signing, and then were trapped in contracts that they found very difficult to execute. I know there have been some very detailed radio programmes that have covered the position of the hon. Gentleman’s constituents and others.
In my area, however, solar has been a success and people are keen to get involved in solar projects. In fact, that is true not only of solar. In Church Minshull in my constituency we have a wonderful Archimedes screw. That is not a cocktail or anything salacious, but a hydropower project that produces enough electricity to power the equivalent of 77 homes. Nevertheless, despite the success of such projects locally, the prospects for solar power nationally are rather bleak. The UK was recently rated 20th out of 20 for global solar photovoltaics prospects between 2018 and 2022 by SolarPower Europe’s global market outlook.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): When the scheme was closed down, there was a lot of talk about alternative technology. My hon. Friend just mentioned the Archimedes screw, and there are other alternative technologies such as batteries. Have they come to fruition at all?

Antoinette Sandbach: There are huge changes coming forward in battery technology. Of course, battery technology will be the key not only to solar energy, but to small-scale wind projects, particularly in relation to how we harness and store such power. There are a number of new and exciting technologies in renewable power. As someone who is keen to see as much of our power as possible coming from renewable sources, I know that the Government are committed to looking at how we can encourage those kinds of projects to go forward, and in the battery sector there is the Government’s Faraday battery challenge.

Given the prospects outlined by SolarPower Europe’s global market outlook, it is clear that the sector needs some positive news, and I hope that the Minister can deliver that today. However, businesses need reassurance more than anything. The Government have been consulting on the replacement to the feed-in tariff regime: the smart export guarantee. The consultation on that measure closed just over four hours ago. However, the export tariff, which is a key part of the FIT, ends on 31 March, which leaves just 18 days to resolve the questions surrounding a replacement before we risk falling into the void that will be created between the old policy closing and the new one beginning.

I welcomed the Minister’s reassurance last November that “solar power should not be provided to the grid for free”.—[Official Report, 20 November 2018, Vol. 649, c. 701.] However, there is a risk that is exactly what will happen if there is a gap between the two schemes, so I would like her to give some reassurance that the replacement scheme will be fully operational in time. This should be a baseline to build upon, not a standard to live up to. What the sector really needs is a minimum floor price.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for her excellent speech. Does she agree that some schools and voluntary sector organisations are really getting involved in this kind of green initiative, and that small businesses in particular could be affected adversely if the scheme fail and the recommendations are not taken up fully by the Government?

Antoinette Sandbach: The Minister will have heard the hon. Lady’s comments, and I hope that she takes account of them, because a minimum floor price would put the sector on the same footing as the offshore wind industry, which benefits from the certainty that contracts for difference provide, and fossil fuel investors, who benefit from the capacity market.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. I note that the Renewable Energy Association has lobbied for a market-based solution, which this clearly is. However, I share some of her concerns that, without certainty on pricing, some people will be deterred from investing here in the first place, unless we can get the matter right.

Antoinette Sandbach: I agree with that assessment, which is why I argue that a minimum floor is needed. I am afraid that failure to extend that kind of certainty to small-scale prosumers will give the impression that the Government are more comfortable with big business than with small producer-consumers.

A fair minimum export price will ensure that consumers are not ripped off while the industry and the new regulation sort themselves out. It will also encourage suppliers to get their systems in place in readiness for market-wide, half-hourly settlement, which will help accelerate the smart energy transition. If a minimum floor price was to be informed by the system imbalance price, it would ensure that all other generators and prosumers could be treated equally, as required by article 21 of the renewable energy directive, without inhibiting innovative smart offerings.

Additionally, the commitment to a zero floor price, while welcome, is insufficient. No country in Europe asks prosumers to pay to put electricity into the grid. Likewise, in 2018 just 0.4% of daylight hours were a negative pricing period. Therefore, given the rarity of such an occasion, this is not what prosumers need. What is needed is the minimum floor price, which would have a transformative impact on the prospects for the sector, not simply a zero floor price.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Lady for securing the debate and for her eloquence in introducing it. I completely agree about the need for a minimum floor price. Before I entered this place, I was the lead on this issue at Leeds City Council, and we put 2,003 solar roofs on council properties. Without being a prosumer, we could not have a FIT reduction, which would allow us to fit more roofs. This is therefore not only about individual consumers; it is about social housing and housing associations, which cannot afford not to have a repayment scheme. The minimum floor price would enable such schemes to be brought forward.

Antoinette Sandbach: I completely agree. I know that councils and housing associations have certainly taken advantage of the ability to install solar power, which is a great development.

The decision needs to be made quickly, to meet the tight deadlines, but it would be a shot in the arm for a sector that has faced a series of difficulties. It would also help to deliver our climate change targets. Yesterday’s Carbon Brief analysis shows that the UK’s CO₂ emissions fell in 2018 for the sixth consecutive year—something
we should celebrate—and if we are to continue that record-breaking trend, we must double down on investment in renewables.

**Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab):** I would like to show my support for the hon. Lady’s initiative on this important matter, and to reinforce her point. Surely the issue is not that our carbon emissions are dropping, but how quickly they are dropping, and the need to accelerate that rapidly. I wholeheartedly support her very worthwhile potential initiative to help accelerate the speed of reduction. I have some experience in our local authority of the benefits, which she mentioned, of local authorities and charities working together to help install solar panels.

**Antoinette Sandbach:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention.

Beyond the need to make the decision, there is a concern that the roll-out of the smart meter programme could have an impact on the deliverability of necessary infrastructure to facilitate the smart export guarantee. SMETS 1 meters, which are in 17 million homes, cannot yet relay export data to the Data Communications Company. What happens to those homes if they install solar? Not a single supplier has trialled export metering through the DCC. Does the Minister know how long the trials take? Will individual homeowners be the testing ground? What reassurance can she give?

The value of the renewables sector, and of solar specifically, is huge to the future of both our economy and our planet. All the sector asks for is to be treated fairly and to be given the reassurance that exists in other parts of the energy market.

**Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con):** My hon. Friend makes a compelling argument on a subject that is important to many constituencies, including mine, where we have an extremely successful company, AES Solar. Does she agree that certainty is absolutely needed, because the deployment of solar photovoltaics fell by 94% in 2018 compared with 2015, which is a worrying statistic?

**Antoinette Sandbach:** I agree that is worrying. I would argue that small-scale renewables encourage our constituents to get involved in a whole green agenda and to look at their homes and their energy use in a completely different way. If we combined that with energy efficiency measures, we would start to get some dramatic change in the sector. If we combined that with energy efficiency measures, we would start to get some dramatic change in the sector.

**Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab):** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Antoinette Sandbach:** This will have to be the last intervention.

**Matt Western:** The hon. Lady is being very generous, and I commend her for bringing the matter before us. From 2012 to 2018 we saw an 80% reduction in installations. If we combined that with energy efficiency measures, we would start to get some dramatic change in the sector. If we combined that with energy efficiency measures, we would start to get some dramatic change in the sector.

This will have to be the last intervention.

**Matt Western:** The hon. Lady is being very generous, and I commend her for bringing the matter before us. From 2012 to 2018 we saw an 80% reduction in installations. We were democratising energy; a powerful thing was going on in this country. It is so important that the sector has some certainty—such as a 10-year plan—to ensure that we deliver.

**Antoinette Sandbach:** The hon. Gentleman will have heard in my speech that I have been arguing for that certainty. The consultation closed four hours ago, so the Minister will not yet have had time to consider the responses, but I think that, from the debate, she will appreciate the urgency of doing so. I hope that she can offer answers to my questions and reassurance to those who have backed renewables. We are rightly proud of our position as a world leader in renewables technology and climate change, and I hope that the Government will take concrete steps to keep us in that positive position.

4.14 pm

**The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I know that you take a strong interest in these matters on behalf of your constituents in Kettering. I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) on securing the debate and putting forward, as always, an excellent, well-informed set of points, which have been responded to and added to by the knowledgeable group we have here today.

I will not do the usual context setting, which is that we are doing very well on the whole agenda. Renewable energy is now up to more than 32%, and emissions continue to fall rapidly. In fact, the last time our CO₂ emissions were this low was in 1888, when Queen Victoria was on the throne. That is absolutely worth celebrating.

**Catherine West:** Will the Minister give way?

**Claire Perry:** I want to respond to the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury, but of course I will accept the intervention.

**Catherine West:** I thank the Minister for being so generous with her time. Will she also congratulate the Greater London Authority and the Mayor of London on the London community energy fund, which helps to promote this sort of initiative?

**Claire Perry:** I will touch on that good point about community. Many good schemes operate across various local authorities.

The feed-in tariff scheme has been an effective part of our great decarbonisation journey. Since 2010, the scheme has supported more than 830,000 installations, 99% of which are solar and are currently generating about 3% of total electricity consumption. Also, a few things have changed since that time, as the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) will know. We have seen a dramatic fall in the cost of solar installation—up to 80% in some cases—which is to be welcomed, as it makes that more accessible to many people. We have also seen a dramatic fall in the cost of other renewable energies.

I like the phrase the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) used: the democratisation of energy. We are all participating, and one of the great benefits is that the hugely important technology that is offshore wind now costs the same, effectively, as building a new gas-fired power plant. That is a benefit to us all and to all our bills.

The feed-in tariff scheme has cost us almost £6 billion to date, and over its lifetime it will continue to cost us all about £30 billion, on many of our bills. It was absolutely right, therefore, that the decision was taken—before my time—to close the scheme. As we move to a lower-cost solar environment, and to a world in which we are
[Claire Perry]

rapidly seeing price parity between renewables and non-renewables technology, it is important to think about the impact on bills.

Matt Western: With all the new build housing that is going up, does the Minister think the Government could be a lot more ambitious? There are hundreds of thousands of houses, which is terrific, but we are so unambitious in enabling people to have that democratisation of energy from within their own properties.

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we have some of the tightest energy efficiency standards for new homes, but I totally agree that we need to go further, and my right hon. and hon. Friends in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government are looking at that right now. Under this Government, we will build millions of homes; that is absolutely part of our ambition, and it is right that we make them as energy efficient as possible and that they contribute as much as possible to this revolution.

I want to focus on a couple of the challenges that my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury emphasised, one of which is the concern about jobs. We have seen that healthy supply chain build up and it is exciting that we are already seeing subsidy-free solar projects at scale being brought forward. One consultant’s estimates tell us that 2.3 GW of solar projects already in the system in the UK with, or awaiting, planning permission could be delivered without subsidy. Lightsource, which has just been bought by BP, says that it is developing 300 MW of subsidy-free projects backed by power purchase agreements, some of which will be delivered during 2019. So we are starting to see solar being delivered at scale without subsidy—indeed, I opened the country’s first subsidy-free solar farm in my first few weeks in the job. That is incredibly exciting, and I am very ambitious for the jobs that will be created over the next few years.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): The Minister is making a very fair point: as the technology has moved forward, the cost of solar has dropped. That is certainly true for the businesses that are taking this agenda forward at scale, but for many individual householders, the cost of investing in panels is still prohibitive. Will she address the question of how the Government could support householders to invest in that technology?

Claire Perry: I am coming to that point. We have not said that the feed-in tariff is no more, and that there is essentially no value out there; there is huge value in having decentralised energy generation. My hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury and others made some powerful points about the role of community energy, which I am passionate about. As she mentioned, it is often a way in which people drink the green Kool-Aid and realise that they can be part of this transformation; zero-carbon faith groups, for instance, are amazing movements. That is why we have continued to support communities.

I was pleased to extract from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs a commitment to the rural community energy fund, which will be reopening for bids later this year; it is an important part of delivering community schemes in many of our constituencies. We have invested £8 million in local energy hubs, which are helping some of the local authority-led schemes that the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green championed, both in London and across the country. We have a local energy contact group, and we are working closely with communities through investments in energy efficiency, local energy schemes, and combined heat and power plants through the £350 million heat network scheme. There is a lot of support for communities that want to move forward.

The smart export guarantee is not just to provide a route to market for those who have installed, or will be installing, decentralised installations; it is intended to do a couple of things. My hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury is quite right to say that this energy should not be provided for free, or indeed at negative prices, as is sometimes the case in other countries. She will be pleased to know that the consultation has not yet closed, although it closes at a quarter to midnight tonight, so hon. Members can make their representations.

The plan is essentially for this scheme—which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) pointed out, is a market-based approach—to help move us towards the smart energy system of the future that we all talk about, in which we have decentralised energy and people are able to do the energy balancing for their home or their community, plugging in their electric vehicles and doing peer-to-peer energy trading. The scheme is designed to support all those exciting things that are out there. I had a very effective meeting with suppliers of products and services who really support this, and who want to get to that decentralised energy future. They accept the points about tariffs needing to be fair and reasonable, and needing to provide an incentive, but they support creating those prosumers, as my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury has said. They support creating that aggregated demand side, meaning that all of us who install solar panels will have some power and some value in the system.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Is the Minister minded to ensure a fair minimum market rate for small-scale generators of exported electricity, to give them some incentive and some degree of confidence?

Claire Perry: That is an important question that will come out in the consultation. Frankly, I would ensure that the market rate was always greater than zero, but that it varied at different times of day, because many of us may have excess energy that we wanted to sell into the grid at a particular time. I want to see what proposals come forward for setting that market rate. There are ideas out there, including that the rate should be wholesale price minus, or that it should be entirely market led.

I take the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury about speed being of the essence when coming forward with a response, but I really want to get this right. I do not want this to be a scheme that we are debating in three years’ time because it has suddenly become unaffordable and has not delivered. My hon. Friend will be aware that installers are already scrutinising with care what we are saying and doing. We do not want to create a hiatus, but we want to produce a set of incentives that works for the future.
Catherine West rose—

Claire Perry: I will come to the hon. Lady’s point in a second.

I talked about jobs and the opportunity for skilled workers to pursue careers in this sector. Not only is there ongoing growth in solar, but so many other opportunities are emerging: electric vehicles, charging infrastructure, smart appliances and battery technology are all working to decarbonise our buildings and our transport systems. The opportunity for green-collar jobs is enormous; we already have almost 400,000 people in the UK working directly in the low-carbon economy or in its supply chain, making it a bigger sector than aerospace. Those jobs exist in the here and now.

Catherine West rose—

Claire Perry: I am going to take an intervention from the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake), who has not spoken yet.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Does the Minister also recognise the potential for the energy company obligation scheme to support innovation, particularly in renewable energy? Often, the challenges to securing a return on investment that developers face can be overcome through the certainty that some sort of support mechanism can offer.

Catherine West: Will the Minister reassure us that when her officers are looking at the responses to the consultation, they will take into account the fact that for small schemes, such as the one that is putting solar panels on schools in my constituency, the overheads tend to be greater?

Claire Perry: Indeed I do, and I am proud to have secured one of the largest increases in innovation research and development spending in the clean energy space. Of course, the ECO scheme, which we have recently pivoted to focus on fuel poverty in its entirety, includes an increase in the amount spent on innovation.

Catherine West: Will the Minister reassure us that when her officers are looking at the responses to the consultation, they will take into account the fact that for small schemes, such as the one that is putting solar panels on schools in my constituency, the overheads tend to be greater?

Claire Perry: That is a valuable point, and the hon. Lady is right to make it.

The consultation is closing in a few hours’ time. I know that it has been welcomed, including by the industry, which sees it as a bridge to a renewable, subsidy-free future. The comments that have been made today will be valuable in ensuring the details of the scheme are acceptable.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The Minister may be under the misapprehension that she has to allow the mover of the motion time to sum up, but that does not apply in half-hour debates, so she has another four minutes if she wants to use them.

Claire Perry: Well, Mr Hollobone, you learn something every day in Parliament. It would perhaps be only courteous to allow my hon. Friend to sum up; is that permissible?

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): It is impermissible.

Claire Perry: I will just keep going, then! If anyone else would like to intervene, the Floor is theirs.

Antoinette Sandbach: One of my concerns is the gap that has been spoken about. I understand the Minister’s desire to get things right, but will she consider extending the FIT scheme to cover that gap, bearing in mind that, given her efficient work in her Department, it is likely to be a short delay?

Claire Perry: Sadly, in all honesty, probably not. We have been clearly signalling the closing of the FIT scheme for several years now, and the response from the industry has been, “We understand that. We understand that some schemes may be on hold, but we welcome the smart export guarantee, because our main ask was to ensure that the energy that was being generated had some value.”

My hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury asked me another question about an issue that I was not fully aware of—namely, the concerns about testing the smart metering equipment technical specification 2 programme to ensure it interacts effectively with solar generation. I have instructed my officials to ensure that that testing is actioned, because that is an important point.

Catherine West: Will the Minister give a brief account of what is happening with Government buildings? They are clearly low-hanging fruit, as it were; there should be more and more solar installations on Government buildings.

Claire Perry: I am sure that the hon. Lady will have read the clean growth strategy from cover to cover, and will have seen in there that we have set out ambitious targets for the central Government estate and the wider estate. As we have so many former representatives of local authorities here, I encourage all Members to look at the Salix scheme, which allows local authorities to green up their own activities and rely on an interest-free revolving loan. It has been a great success story, and one that we must do a lot more on.

I will mention another issue—briefly, as I only have two minutes. A question was asked about encouraging housing associations and others to be involved, and I have been encouraging housing associations and local authorities to think about issuing green financial instruments. There is a huge appetite for green bonds, either individually or collectively, and using that funding for some of the excellent energy efficiency work that is available.

Matt Rodda: On a related matter, will the Minister also consider the issue of the private rented sector, which in some parts of our towns and cities makes up a substantial amount of the homes in those local authority areas? In my experience as a former councillor, there is a serious issue with both fuel poverty—people living in poverty in private rented homes—and poor insulation linked to a lack of take-up of solar.

Claire Perry: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I am pleased to tell him that one of the pieces of legislation we have introduced ensures that the least efficient homes in the private rented sector will no longer be allowed to be re-rented until those improvements have been made.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury for an excellent and timely debate. I will just say something that is a tiny bit political: would it not be lovely if we
could get through Brexit and vote for the deal so that we could bring all this collective knowledge together to solve these problems, which are about not the next three years but the next 30? If we do that, will my hon. Friend promise us that she will mix us an Archimedes’ screw cocktail, so that we can celebrate and focus on saving the planet, rather than saving our sanity in the Brexit negotiations?

Question put and agreed to.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Will those Members not staying for the next debate please be kind enough to leave quickly and, importantly, quietly?

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Will those Members not staying for the next debate please be kind enough to leave quickly and, importantly, quietly?

[4.30 pm]

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the effect of leaving the EU without a deal on public sector catering.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I start by thanking all the public sector catering providers, users and campaigners who have been in touch with me over the past week to raise their concerns about this issue. I can see a number of them in the Public Gallery today. I am extremely grateful and pleased that they have made the journey here today.

Although a no-deal Brexit in general is deeply concerning to me and many others up and down the country, I tabled this debate because the quality, quantity and safety of the food provided to some of the most vulnerable in our society is often overlooked in the debates around a no-deal Brexit. I therefore wanted to speak up today for the estimated 10.5 million people in the UK who rely on public sector institutions for some of their food. Some are completely reliant on such institutions for all their meals. I want to say clearly to the Government that no deal should not mean no meal.

The Soil Association brief sent to me yesterday reads clearly:

“It is very likely that a No deal Brexit would be disastrous for public sector catering.”

Institutions including schools, universities, hospitals, care homes, meals on wheels and prisons will be adversely affected by a no-deal Brexit. They feed some of the most vulnerable in our society. Without those services, many would simply not eat. High quality public sector catering is so important to the health and wellbeing of millions of people across the country. A drop in standards or the availability of nutritious food because of a no-deal Brexit would be extremely detrimental to service users.

I want to focus on three main concerns today, which I will address in turn: the cost and availability of meals; the quality, quantity and safety of food available to public sector providers; and, finally, workforce retention.

At the end of last year, the Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, told the Treasury Committee that in the most “extreme” no-deal Brexit, food prices would rise by 10%, but that in a less severe scenario, the increase would be about 6%. Either scenario is concerning to suppliers of public sector catering, which are already struggling to cover the cost of nutritious meals.

For example, the allowance for universal infant free school meals is £2.30. That goes directly to schools and is not ring-fenced. It has not been increased since the start of universal infant free school meals in September 2014. In many cases, the caterers do not receive the full amount. Bidfood has calculated that with 13% inflationary costs and the potential increase in costs following no deal, the meal allowance would need to be increased by 69p to bring the allowance back to where we are now. There are serious concerns about the impact Brexit could have on the provision of school meals in some schools, particularly small rural schools, that no longer receive the small school allowance of £2,000, which ceased about two years ago.
Due to Brexit uncertainty, caterers have reported an overall increase in costs of up to 20% for some ingredients over the past 12 months, with the cost of eggs reported to be up by 14%.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate and making the case about food price rises. Is she not also concerned that a no-deal Brexit might lead to trade deals that lower standards, particularly with the US? The National Farmers Union has said that it is concerned about US practices and that trade deals should “not allow imports of food produced to lower standards than those required of British farmers”, such as chlorine-washed chicken or hormone-fed beef. We might be pushed to lower standards for cheaper food. That is a huge health and safety issue for our children.

Mrs Hodgson: I totally agree with my hon. Friend, and I will touch on the issue he raises later in my contribution. This morning, I sat on a no-deal Delegated Legislation Committee with my shadow Public Health Minister hat on. In that Committee Room, we were talking about the very issues my hon. Friend raises in respect of a no-deal Brexit. The Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), assured me that our chicken will still be washed in drinking water and not in any form of chlorine. However, my hon. Friend’s worry is very much taken on board, given that the money will not be there and costs will be cut to the bone—no pun intended.

In the event of a no-deal Brexit, the prices of raw materials and commodities will go up, but who will absorb the price increases? Social care providers, particularly those with a majority of local authority-funded residents, will not have the capability to accept increased catering costs. Will the Government therefore increase the budgets for public sector catering to cover the shortfall?

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I apologise for being slightly late for the beginning of the debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing it. In my city of Hull, there has been an attempt to keep school meal prices as low as possible—50p, rather than the normal £2-odd. What concerns me is that there is already pressure on that budget. It has already gone up to £1 because of school budget pressures. What does she think about the fact that there is a public health initiative to try to ensure that children are eating healthily and well, yet the cost may go up even more due to what she has described in her contribution?

Mrs Hodgson: That is the worry. As Bidfood worked out, the cost will have to go up by 69p a child just to stand still. In areas that are trying to keep the price as low as possible, that initiative disappears, but in other areas that are already paying £2.30 or £2.40, what will happen? Parents cannot afford to pay much more than that, so the quality of the food, children’s health and the health of the 10.5 million people who rely on this food every day will suffer as a consequence.

If the Government do not cover the shortfall, menus may have to be reduced so that providers do not overspend. As my hon. Friend has just said, that will compromise the nutritional value of the meals given to service users. An increase in the costs of public sector meals could therefore see an increase in poverty, childhood obesity and malnutrition in hospitals and care homes, which could have serious implications for the health and wellbeing of service users.

The affordability of food post Brexit, especially in the event of no deal, is an incredibly alarming issue. That is the case for all our constituents, but even more so for those who rely on public sector catering for their food. General food shortages due to panic buying or an impact on deliveries due to fuel shortages are of particular concern, especially for public sector catering in hospitals and care homes. The Government should communicate openly and factually about the food challenges ahead and encourage the food industry, caterers, institutions and organisations to do so too.

One person wrote to me to say that the Government had given them “no real guidance, other than to stockpile food”. One local authority caterer told Food for Life that it had invested more than £1 million in stockpiling ingredients, including 250 tonnes of meat. However, the caterer is concerned, as that food will only last for a short period. Not every caterer has the capacity to stockpile food. What advice have the Government given to suppliers and caterers? Is advice being updated clearly and regularly?

The Federation of Wholesale Distributors has expressed concern about the continuity of food supplies to schools and hospitals in the event of a no-deal Brexit. It has suggested that food supplies should be triaged and prioritised for those most in need, but that could happen only with Government intervention. Is that something the Minister has considered? Concerns have also been raised with me about products being diverted to more lucrative customers, rather than being prioritised for vulnerable people. Will the Minister address that point too?

The Civil Contingencies Act 2004 does not deal directly with food—probably nobody ever thought that we would be in this position—and nor does it identify responsible agencies with a food remit. Has the Minister had any conversations with his Government colleagues about including food in the 2004 Act, particularly for vulnerable people?

The meals distributed in schools, universities, hospitals, care homes and prisons each day are crucial to those who eat them. Caterers are already beginning to remove higher quality produce from menus, with some school caterers considering a move from hot food to cold meals. That could result in a reduction in the nutritional value of meals, which would be detrimental to children or to service users in the case of the other provisions.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): My hon. Friend does amazing work on schools through the all-party parliamentary group, and through the children’s future food inquiry, which I am pleased to be involved in. She will know that there is real concern about children living in food poverty. Indeed, the Food Foundation assessed towards the end of last year that around 3.7 million children are living in households that would have to spend 42% of their annual income to meet the guidance of the “eatwell plate”. That is simply unaffordable and if food prices rocket because of Brexit, it will become even more so. Does she share my concern that we are reaching crisis point?
Mrs Hodgson: I am really grateful that my hon. Friend has made that point. The average person spends 17% to 18% of their income on food, but people living on benefits and in poverty spend around 42% of their money on food, and that is at today’s prices. We do not need a mathematician to work out what a vulnerable position people will be in if food prices go up. Even the 6% increase would have a detrimental effect.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that there must also be a concern about food banks, and especially about schemes such as FareShare and organisations such as the Pickle Palace in my constituency that provide low-cost meals and “pay-what-you-can” food for people on low incomes.

Mrs Hodgson: That is another very good point. Often, those who supply local authority caterers are some of the best for supplying food banks and FareShare. When they have to trim and trim again, that will be one of the charitable aspects of their operations that will sadly have to go. Again, that will have a knock-on effect on the poorest and most vulnerable in our society.

Kerry McCarthy: My hon. Friend is being very generous. I am involved in something called Feeding Bristol, which is an offshoot of Feeding Britain—an organisation that aims to eradicate food poverty. We were discussing this matter at a meeting last week. Food prices going up will create an affordability issue, and if people stockpile and panic-buy food and the supermarkets run dry, donated food to hostels and food banks will dry up completely. Not only will people be more likely to have to go to food banks because they will be unable to afford food—and they might not be getting such good quality food through public sector catering—but food banks will run out as well.

Mrs Hodgson: I hope that the Minister acknowledges the picture being painted of the potential knock-on effects. I appreciate that this is the worst-case scenario—a no-deal, catastrophe scenario—but, given that there is no deal on the table that the majority of the House can vote for, a responsible Parliament has to prepare for it. These doomsday scenarios could become the reality for many people’s lives, despite none of us in this room wanting that to happen.

Does the Minister share my concern about a reduction in the safety and nutritional quality of food served to those using public sector catering, especially given that those meals are, as we have heard, the main source of nutrition for millions of people—10.5 million people, day in and day out, up and down the country? Equally, public sector caterers must provide food that meets specific health or cultural needs, such as kosher, gluten-free, vegetarian or allergy-specific food. There are many other examples. For some, it could be a matter of life or death. For others, a failure to provide nutritionally complete meals would slow down their recovery and increase the risk of malnutrition, or result in a deficiency in other nutritional values.

I received a message from the National Association of Care Catering that reads:“We have 60 plus residents in our home, so have to provide 60 meals three times a day, with the average age of 86, how do we ensure regular supply?” That is of great concern across the industry. Even where contingencies can be made, it may involve people eating very bland or repetitive menus, which I know goes against the entire ethos of public sector catering.

Finally, the workforce are crucial to public sector catering. Have the Government engaged with the catering sector to understand the challenges that a disorderly Brexit might pose to its workforce and services? The public sector employs a considerable number of EU nationals, and I am told that some are already returning home. The threat of a no-deal Brexit will only make the situation worse, thereby posing a threat to the services that the sector provides, and having an impact on safety.

Although new members of staff can, of course, be recruited, it takes time and money to train them. A workforce gap in the event of a no-deal Brexit would limit the effectiveness of public sector catering, which is already facing all the challenges that I have highlighted. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that the public sector catering workforce are trained, equipped and funded to provide vital services in the event of no deal?

Public sector catering is fundamental to the care provided in schools, universities, hospitals, care homes and prisons. A delay in food deliveries, an increase in the cost of food and a decrease in nutritional standards or safety could be detrimental to service users and, in some cases, a matter of life or death. When we talk about the impact of no deal on our health and wellbeing, we must also consider the availability of food to the most vulnerable in our society, which a number of my hon. Friends have spoken about.

What about those who cannot afford to stockpile or lack the capacity to do so? What about those who are in hospitals, care homes or prisons? They cannot stockpile food in their little bedside cabinet. I do not have time to discuss this issue fully now—thankfully others have mentioned it—but we must remember that a surge in food prices could mean a reduction in donations to food banks from public sector caterers, some of whom are very generous to not only food banks but to holiday provision. I know that Bidfood supports holiday clubs. My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) spoke in glowing terms about Bidfood’s support for her holiday clubs at the latest APPG meeting. All of that will have implications for families already living in poverty.

Brexit should not be the reason that millions of people go hungry, and I hope that after the debate the Minister will have considered another aspect of a no-deal Brexit that perhaps the Government had not already considered. I hope that he will urgently relay what I have said back to his Government colleagues. In closing, I reiterate that no deal should not mean no meal. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

4.49 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr. Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson). She is a hard act to follow, and I have had to do so twice today—I was on the Delegated Legislation Committee with her this morning.

To be perfectly honest, I had not really thought about this subject in any great depth until I was asked to sum up for the SNP in this debate. I have learned so much
listening to the hon. Lady, and I congratulate her on her speech. Having now considered the issue, I realise that a worrying, appalling impact may result for the most vulnerable people in our society.

The hon. Lady talked about three main areas—cost and availability, quantity and quality of food, and workforce retention. They are all points that the Minister must take on board. I hope he will be able to reassure all of us, and the wider public, about these issues in the event of a no-deal Brexit.

I have some wonderful organisations in my constituency of Motherwell and Wishaw. My office and I run a poverty action group, which meets quarterly. The next meeting, due in the next month or so, is sure to have this issue very high on the agenda. We deal with carers and people who work in the public sector, and mainly with organisations that help the most vulnerable. It is really important to consider the point that was made about how, at present, 40% of some household budgets is spent on food. If there are food shortages, which are a possibility with a no-deal Brexit, that percentage is going to rise, and could rise significantly. That will also affect the nutritional value of what can be done in the home and in public sector catering.

North Lanarkshire is a Labour-controlled council, and I frequently comment on whether it does well or badly, according to my lights. In this case, it does a wonderful job through its running of an organisation called Club 365 that provides nutritious meals for those children in primaries 1 to 7, aged 5 to 12, who receive free school meals during the school week, at weekends and in school holidays, with the aim of ending holiday hunger. I know many Members across the Chamber have been working hard to prevent that for quite a long time.

Although there are fewer public sector care homes than there used to be—that has been forced on many local authorities—it is appalling to think that, in the event of a no-deal Brexit, many older people could finish up with poorer quality meals, at a time when for many of them a hot meal is the main part of their day, especially if it is provided through meals on wheels or other similar organisations. The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) made a good point about food banks and other organisations that rely on donations also being affected in the event of a no-deal Brexit.

The knock-on effect of a no-deal Brexit on food is quite appalling to consider. I am sure the Minister is going to reassure us that it will all be all right on the night and that there are contingency plans already prepared and that no one will go hungry, but I do not think the United Kingdom is ready to dig for victory, as prepared and that no one will go hungry, but I do not think that anyone is going to suddenly change their mind and make a career in catering or in care homes, just because there is a job available.

I hope the Minister is able to answer some of the fears that have been expressed here today. Leaving with no deal is a serious and worrying prospect. The SNP is against the United Kingdom exiting the EU, but nevertheless we put forward suggestions on how compromises could be made so that there would not be such a brutal disruption to life in this country after we leave the European Union.

Marion Fellows: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. Only last summer in Angus in Scotland, many fruit farms could not recruit the workers who traditionally came from EU countries and a lot of the fruit lay rotting in the fields. This is a really serious issue.

This is perhaps slightly off key—I apologise, Mr Hollobone. I was thinking of EU nations and public service catering, and I like to think that I provide a public service in being a Member of Parliament! I started to look around at the number of people who were serving me. So many of them are EU nationals, but because of the almost hostile environment—there is a current story in Scotland of a woman who has been here for 47 years and does not understand why she has to register because this is her home; what else is she going to do?—there are real difficulties for the many EU nationals who are here and who might stay and register. In Scotland, they are very welcome. There will also be many who are completely put off even thinking about coming to work here.

For example, so many EU nationals work in care homes. It is all very well for the Government to say that those jobs could be done by UK citizens, but they are not being done by UK citizens. I do not think that anyone is going to suddenly change their mind and make a career in catering or in care homes, just because there is a job available.

I hope the Minister is able to answer some of the fears that have been expressed here today. Leaving with no deal is a serious and worrying prospect. The SNP is against the United Kingdom exiting the EU, but nevertheless we put forward suggestions on how compromises could be made so that there would not be such a brutal disruption to life in this country after we leave the European Union.

4.57 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to make the winding-up speech for the Opposition with you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on securing this important debate. As other hon. Friends have said, she does a huge amount of work in this area, not least through her chairpersonship of the all-party parliamentary group on school food. She has done the House a real service by focusing our attention on the likely impact of a no-deal exit from the EU on public sector catering, and on all those who are looked after by public sector institutions. Her warnings were all the more powerful for being delivered with her customary frankness and thoughtfulness.

This is not the first debate in which hon. and right hon. Members have raised concerns about the implications of a no-deal exit from the EU and it is obvious why that is so. An exit from the EU on 29 March or any date thereafter without agreement would be nothing short of a national disaster, affecting every facet of our national life and every region and nation of the UK. It would
end, at a stroke, the whole body of legal arrangements we have with the EU, built up over many decades. Its effects would extend far beyond the absence of a trade deal, leaving the UK without rules to govern trade in a range of crucial areas, from financial contract clearing to medicines regulation. It would threaten the complex law enforcement and judicial co-operation arrangements that keep Britain safe. It would almost inevitably result in infrastructure being placed on the Irish border, place untold strain on the Good Friday agreement and Anglo-Irish relations more generally, and exacerbate the political instability in Northern Ireland.

In short, such an exit is the hardest and most chaotic of departures possible. To be honest, no one knows for sure how extensive the negative impact would be, yet among Brexiteers, brimming with the misplaced confidence that has defined their approach to this process, the fantasy of a cost-free, no-deal exit lives on.

The most cavalier among the Brexiteers dismiss any concerns out of hand as the latest round of “Project Fear” alarmism; others concede that there will be disruption, but insist it would be only temporary and would be outweighed by the new legal freedoms and opportunities arising from being completely outside the EU’s orbit. In debates in the House, they exhort us to have faith that the British people would make the best of it. I have no doubt that they would make the best of it, but why would any Government force the British people to cope with an entirely avoidable act of self-harm, which opinion polling suggests only a minority of the public support?

No Government in their right mind should countenance a no-deal exit from the EU, especially when the other party to the negotiations knows full well that that is an empty threat. The tragedy is that instead of simply announcing that under no circumstances will the UK leave the EU without a deal, this Government have adopted such an outcome as their official plan B, endlessly repeating over many months the mantra that no deal is better than a bad deal. They have spent significant sums of public money trying— I emphasise that word—to ensure they are prepared for it.

The Government have kept alive the possibility of a no-deal exit in spite of the stark conclusions of their internal assessments of the implications. From the no-deal impact assessment summary, which was forced out of the Government two weeks ago, we now have a clearer idea of what a no-deal Brexit would entail in specific sectors and for different regions and nations of the UK. The impact summary makes it absolutely clear that the UK is simply not prepared for a no-deal exit on 29 March, with Departments on track for just over two thirds of the most critical projects. The summary is honest about the fact that in the event of a no-deal exit the UK would be at the mercy of the actions of the European Commission, EU member states and EU businesses. In other words, the Government would not be in control of the situation.

The summary admits that there is little evidence that businesses are preparing in earnest for a no-deal scenario, and the readiness of small and medium-size enterprises is particularly low.

The impact summary plainly restates the UK Government’s estimate that, compared with today’s arrangements, the economy would be 6.3% to 9% smaller over a 15-year period, which brings me to the subject of this debate. The summary makes it clear that the anticipated effects of a no-deal scenario across a range of areas would include the UK’s food supply being affected by delays in goods crossing the channel and a likely rise in food prices, and many businesses in the food supply industry are simply unprepared.

Disruption to food supplies and an increase in food prices would affect every single one of us. My hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West is absolutely right to draw attention, by way of this debate, to the significant implications of a no-deal exit for people who rely on public sector catering for their meals, especially if the UK exits without a deal on 29 March—a time of year when we import a large proportion of our fresh food from Europe, and in the run-up to the Easter weekend.

My hon. Friend is right to make it clear that we are talking about 10.5 million people potentially affected—hospital patients, care home residents, prisoners and school pupils—of whom I think she said 1.5 million are children who are eligible for free school meals. I want to emphasise concerns about the impact of a no-deal exit from the EU with regard to the cost and availability of meals; the quality, quantity and safety of food available to public sector providers; and the issue of how we ensure that we recruit and retain a workforce to deliver the service. In saying that, I very much echo the comments made by the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows).

I was particularly struck by the revelation that many caterers have been advised by Government to stockpile food, and that one local authority has already spent £1 million on doing so. My hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West is right to point out that most schools and hospitals lack the money and the necessary storage space to stockpile food. She set out in painstaking detail how tight the margins are on the meals these institutions supply, and how sensitive they are to price increases. She rightly drew our attention to the fact that the implications of any food disruption, particularly with fresh fruit and vegetables, and an increase in food prices would be especially stark for the 1.5 million children in this country who are eligible for free school meals, and, in a wider sense, for people who rely on the social security system and find themselves in deprivation.

My hon. Friend also raised a series of important points, not least the deficiencies of the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 with regard to food. I will not go over all of them. However, in the light of the concerns she raised, may I press the Minister to set out in detail what specific contingency planning the Government have undertaken, or are currently undertaking, to ensure that public sector caterers can cope with food disruption and/or food price increases? Will he explain precisely what his Department is doing to ensure that public sector institutions of the kind we have discussed do not find themselves in competition with the private sector or private consumers for food essentials in the event of a no-deal exit?

I expect the Minister to ignore the following question, as his colleagues in the Department for Exiting the European Union have done repeatedly in the past week, but it would be fantastic if he gave me an answer. Will he tell us whether the Government intend on 13 March to whip against a no-deal exit, should the House once again vote down the deal on the preceding day? It is
simply not good enough to dismiss the question on the basis that it is a hypothetical decision on a hypothetical vote. There is a high likelihood that next week we will confront this issue and that of extending article 50, and the country really deserves to know the Government’s intentions on whipping their Members of Parliament on that vote.

There are now only 25 days until 29 March. By my calculation, there are 16 sitting days. Although an extension to the article 50 process is now almost certain, it is not guaranteed. Even if the House votes for an extension on 14 March, we could simply end up facing a much sharper cliff edge if the Government insist only on a short, one-off extension and recklessly continue to run down the clock in the hope that the failed strategy to which they have adhered for the 49 days since 15 January will pay off.

The possibility of a no-deal exit—whether by accident or design—is still very real. On 29 January, a clear majority in the House voted against a no-deal exit by backing the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) and the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman). I have no doubt that the House will do so again on 13 March if the Government’s deal goes down to a second defeat.

It is time that the Government responded to the will of Parliament and announced that under no circumstances will the UK leave the EU without a deal. To do otherwise risks the Government finding themselves responsible for a disastrous outcome that, as we have heard today, would endanger the health and wellbeing of people who can least afford it.

5.6 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship once again, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) asked about contingency planning, and I can assure him that there is a lot of it going on. We are working very closely with industry, which has led most of the contingency planning—we are providing support and direction. The industry has the expertise and capacity to help ensure that we minimise any potential disruption to supply.

We have been working through various forums, including DEFRA’s long-standing food chain emergency liaison group, which has been through many experiences in the past. As a result of extensive engagement with the food industry and cross-Government discussions, as previously stated, in a worst-case no-deal scenario consumers and businesses will continue to have access to a wide range of food products. We are working to mitigate possible disruption in availability and choice of certain seasonal products in that case, which I think it is fair to say would indeed be a worst-case scenario.

DEFRA is working with the Department for Transport and with industry to ensure that, in the event of a no-deal scenario, goods can continue to be transported on existing trade routes, including across the Dover straits, as quickly as possible. That includes securing extra freight capacity across the English channel, and ensuring a functioning customs, VAT and excise system from day one, to facilitate the flow of goods. To have that consistent supply is vital.

We are working closely with the industry and across Government through the border delivery group—a co-ordinated effort across Government to tackle that vital issue. We have also been working with the Cabinet Office and lead Departments in their work to ensure the resilience of food supply in public sector settings, including schools, hospitals and social care settings, as well as prisons and the military. Some of those have been mentioned in the debate. The lead Departments include the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Education, the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Defence. We have been working flat out to ensure that we have robust contingency plans in place for public sector food provision. We are reviewing catering services and contracts and have engaged with providers of food, such as hospital trusts and schools, to identify the risks and contingency measures for their sectors.

That includes working closely with catering suppliers to ensure that contingency plans are in place. Suppliers have been looking at a variety of contingency measures to ensure the continued provision of food that meets standards—for example, looking at alternative suppliers and adjusting menus in line with product availability while continuing to meet school and hospital food standards. It is vital to continue to meet the requirements of those standards. Lead Departments are confident that the public will continue to receive nutritious meals in public sector settings. If time permits, I will go into some more detail about the various sectors.

The hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich asked about prioritising between public and private sectors. In the contingency plan, we want to ensure that food
available to all sectors but, as he rightly stated, for many public sector services and vulnerable groups we need to ensure food provision. We believe that, even in a worst case scenario, customers will continue to have access to a broad range of food, and that will extend to those services as well. Different choices of food types might be necessary, but there will be enough food to ensure the balanced diet that people need.

Another question was about food prices. Clearly the best way to ensure against any impact on food prices is to get the deal, but in a no-deal scenario it is again to minimise the disruption to food supply. We therefore need to work across Government to find ways of ensuring that the food supply is available. DEFRA officials are working with the DFT to find ways over potential hurdles and challenges to ensure that continuity of supply. As we do that, we will ensure that any potential price rises are kept to a minimum, and of course we have mechanisms in place to help those who are most needy if prices were to rise significantly. Her Majesty’s Treasury and the Department for Work and Pensions are aware of the potential impacts, and we are working with them on that. I hope that addresses some of the concerns expressed today.

Moving on to the Department for Education and schools in particular, a number of points were made about schools. The DFE is confident that schools will continue to be able to provide pupils with nutritious school meals no matter what the outcome of EU exit is. It expects schools still to meet the school food standards in a no-deal scenario. Schools have a great deal of flexibility in the foods that they can deliver under those standards. If a particular product is not readily available for any reason, the standards allow schools a wide range of freedoms to substitute similar foods that are available.

In January, the Department for Education published a technical notice on no-deal preparations for schools in England, including information on food supplies. The DFE is also engaging with leading school food suppliers, local authorities and schools as part of its preparations. We will continue to monitor that and work with the Department.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) asked about school meals. Schools and their suppliers have considerable freedom to source food that offers the best value for money. When considering the potential for any price rises, it is important to note that the UK has a high level of food security built into a diverse range of sources, including strong domestic production and imports from other countries, as I said before. We do not envisage a scenario in which the Government would need to provide additional funding to support schools with rising food costs, for the reason I set out earlier: the UK has a high level of food security. We are confident that schools, colleges and other settings will continue to be able to provide pupils with nutritious school meals whatever the outcome of Brexit.

Another hon. Member asked about the Civil Contingencies Act. It does cover food supply, but it is designed for a national emergency. In a worst case Brexit scenario, we do not believe that overall food shortages would be such that it is necessary to invoke the Act. In the scenarios that we are working to, that would not be required. None the less, as I have said several times, we are working with and speaking to colleagues across Government to minimise disruption and to consider the possible impacts on vulnerable groups.

The hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), who is no longer in her place, and the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) mentioned the potential impact on food banks. Again, we do not expect overall shortages of food, but we speak regularly to retailers—in fact, I will be speaking with a group of them after the debate, so I can re-emphasise concerns expressed in this Chamber—and our aim is to ensure that we can continue the food supply so that consumers do not need to alter their shopping patterns.

The hon. Members for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) mentioned watered down standards. The hon. Member for Bristol East holds my feet to the fire on this issue regularly, and she has a consistent record on it across Government. We respect her views—no question—and she knows that, but it is important to recognise that, no matter the future challenges, there are also opportunities. However, we do not want to see the watering down of food standards in any way. I think she is aware that protections are in place as far as chlorinated chicken or hormone-treated beef are concerned—I cannot resist mentioning that.

Kerry McCarthy: The Minister is appearing before the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee tomorrow afternoon, so he can expect a little more of that treatment then.

David Rutley: I look forward to it with glee. I am sure that I will get more of that treatment. We can talk in more detail then, but I hope the hon. Lady understands the reassurances given consistently in various settings in the House.

I will move on to health and social care. The DHSC is confident that its contingency plans for ensuring the seamless supply of products and services after we leave the EU are comprehensive and robust, and that food supply for patients will be protected in a no-deal scenario. The Department is working with food providers and suppliers to understand their contingency planning and mitigation activities. That work covers both social care and NHS providers.

The DHSC is working closely with Public Health England and nutritional specialists to ensure that nutritional standards are maintained in hospitals and care homes. Standard guidelines are being finalised for health and adult social care providers to support the continued provision of a balanced diet, in line with the Government’s “eatwell” guide. The DHSC is also working to ensure that it has the necessary resources and contingencies in place to continue to protect patients and to have uninterrupted supplies of any specialist nutritional products, including infant formula. It is important to note that, because a lot of the focus has been on ensuring the continued supply of vital medicines—or vet meds, for that matter—but we will also protect key nutritional products such as infant formula.

We are working very closely with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that local authorities are able to support vulnerable people such as the elderly and vulnerable families. Hon.
Members are probably aware that we are working very actively with local resilience forums. Local authorities need to work with their local resilience forums to plan and prepare for localised disruptions, identify potential risks and produce emergency plans to prevent or mitigate the impact of any incident on their local communities. We are doing that at a local level. We meet regularly with key contacts in LRFs to share intelligence on the impacts that a no-deal EU exit would have on local areas. DEFRA and MHCLG have provided advice to LRFs on food supply impacts, to support their preparedness for a no-deal exit, and particularly to consider any impacts on vulnerable groups if they should arise. We are working closely to mitigate issues with vulnerable groups at a local level.

The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West was assiduous in mentioning workforce retention, which is vital across Government. We rely very heavily on those citizens in many public services, and in services that are provided in the public sector for the public. I share her concern; we want to continue to make them feel welcome, whatever the scenario might be.

The Government have been clear that we will protect EU citizens’ rights, including in a no-deal scenario. All EU citizens resident in the UK by 29 March will be able to stay. They will have until 31 December 2020 to apply for settled status. We want them to feel welcome and we recognise the contribution they make. DEFRA will have a clear strategy for those who work so hard in the food supply chain, often in critical sectors—slaughterhouses, meat processing and vets. It is uppermost in our mind.

As we leave the EU, the Government are committed to securing the best possible deal for Britain that works for farmers, food producers and consumers, and ensures strong public services. Although we do not want or expect a no deal, the Government are taking sensible measures to prepare for all scenarios.

Matthew Pennycook: The Minister will know from the no-deal impact assessment summary that one particular concern is that, despite communications from the Government, there is little evidence that businesses are preparing in earnest for a no-deal scenario. Does the Minister have a sense of whether the public catering industry suppliers and providers are responding to the Government’s call to prepare themselves, or whether the industry is lagging behind, as others clearly are?

David Rutley: The hon. Gentleman asks a good question. I meet the National Farmers Union, the Food and Drink Federation, UKHospitality and the British Retail Consortium every week to review their concerns and considerations. We have established a good dialogue at a senior level with those trade bodies and their members, but it is fair to say there is still more work required with small and medium-sized enterprises, particularly our smaller and microbusinesses. Some are prepared and some need further information. I hope that he recognises that across Government a far greater weight of activity is being put out to encourage people to find out more about what is going on and to engage in the processes. We are working very hard on that but there is more work to do.

The UK has a high degree of overall food security, and that will remain the case, deal or no deal. As well as DEFRA’s work to support contingency planning by the food industry, and the industry’s proven capability to respond to supply chain disruptions, steps are being taken by my colleagues across other Government Departments. We are all working to ensure the resilience of food supplies in the public sector. Across Government, Departments are putting into place the necessary steps to ensure that patients, school children and others who are reliant on the public sector will be supplied with nutritious, high-quality and safe food in all exit scenarios.

5.24 pm

Mrs Hodgson: I thank everyone who has attended the debate. I am sure that if there was not so much other business, not least the no-deal statutory instruments in almost every room in the House, many more Members would have taken part. It was definitely a case of quality over quantity.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Blaydon (Liz Twist), for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), as well as the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows). I hope it does not come to a situation where we have to dig for victory. I was not around then and I do not think the hon. Lady or any of us have dug for victory—I would definitely have to give up false nails if it came to that.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) for his excellent contribution. I used the figure of 24 or 25 days, but he has worked out that there are 16 sitting days before we could crash out without a deal. We all hope that it will not come to that, and that next week we can get a deal through the House that everyone can vote for, but the subject of this debate was no-deal preparation for public sector catering. We sincerely hope that if it comes to that, public sector catering providers will be prioritised if there are any food shortages, as they cater to some of the most vulnerable people in our society who are least able to prepare, stockpile or go in search of food.

The Minister said that he believed there will be no need for the Government to help to fund any shortfall or costs for schools or other public sector catering, as the Government feel that the food supply is secure enough to withstand a no-deal Brexit. I do not have access to all the research he has access to in the Government but, following my research, I do not share his optimism. I hope that the Government will commit to revisiting the decision if that situation arose. I thank everyone once again. Let us hope that we will not be in the position that we have all been talking about.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the effect of leaving the EU without a deal on public sector catering.

5.27 pm

Sitting adjourned.
The county of Essex, but from colleagues and representatives interest in this issue not just from constituents across Members for Rochford and Southend East (James having granted this debate, and to his office for having Essex. have the right factors and catalysts driving those projects. intervention to ensure that we keep Essex moving and so much, and why we need Government support and infrastructure—which naturally brings a return on will demonstrate why investment in transport need to be progressed, it is important to give the specific transportation schemes across Essex and projects in particular. I have no doubt that, when being briefed by officials for this debate, he had a peek into those Essex County Council, who have joined us today.

Transport infrastructure across Essex is an issue of major importance. As the Minister knows, I have secured a number of Adjournment debates on the topic and asked one or two parliamentary questions about it. I suspect that in his office and his Department, there might be some filing cabinets containing much correspondence on a number of issues, and about Essex in particular. I have no doubt that, when being briefed by officials for this debate, he had a peek into those filing cabinets and so is well prepared to deal with the questions and issues that will come up.

The debate is about emphasising the need to progress infrastructure across the county of Essex, and addressing some of the serious questions that need answering about how we do so. Before going into details about specific transportation schemes across Essex and projects that need to be progressed, it is important to give the Minister an overview of the economy of Essex. That will demonstrate why investment in transport infrastructure—which naturally brings a return on investment back to the county and to the country—matters so much, and why we need Government support and intervention to ensure that we keep Essex moving and have the right factors and catalysts driving those projects.

The economy of the county of Essex, including the unitary authorities of Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock, is dynamic and innovative. The House has constantly heard that where Essex leads, others follow; that is because we are a county of entrepreneurs, who have seen our county throughout the good times and the bad. I think all Members present, including BAE Systems, Teledyne e2v, Fläkt Woods in Colchester, and Crittall in Witham. We have a high-tech cluster; we specialise in life sciences, renewable energies, aerospace, defence, security, biotech, digittech—you name it, we have it going on.

We also have a vibrant agricultural and food production sector. In the county of Essex, farming alone is worth over £600 million to our economy and employs over 8,000 people. We have the famous Wilkin & Sons, Wicks Manor, and Shaken Udder Milkshakes, which is based in my constituency. All those businesses are testimonials to Essex. If the Minister would like some more statistics, I can tell him that we produce every year enough wheat to make 1.3 billion loaves of bread, enough barley to make 280 million pints of beer, and 150 million eggs. We also grow outdoor vegetables on 5,000 acres of land, so roads and transport are important to us.

On top of that, we are attracting more and more businesses and professionals across the finance and insurance sectors; we have 66,000 professionals in Essex, so it is important that we continue to grow and support them. We have a dynamic academic and educational sector with Writtle University College, Anglia Ruskin University and the University of Essex—my former university—with its knowledge gateway. It is an outstanding university with a first-class international reputation.

We have so much going on in the areas of multi-modality connectivity and logistics. We have over 1,000 acres of port-adjacent, tri-modally connected logistics and distribution sites, which are the backbone of our economy,
and we are connected by road, rail, sea and air to global markets. We have four major seaports—London Gateway, Tilbury, Harwich and Purfleet—with a fifth major port, Felixstowe, just over the border in Suffolk. There are also six port-side rail freight terminals and three key tri-modal logistic sites at London Gateway and the London distribution park. Of course, we also have our airports: Stansted, which is the UK’s third largest air freight hub by capacity, and Southend airport. Those airports are not just growing, but experiencing considerable passenger growth and, in the case of Stansted, benefiting from private sector investment to the tune of £600 million. Essex is also connected to Heathrow, Gatwick and Luton airports through our connections to the infamous M25.

However, we need to ensure that our roads keep traffic moving. One statistic says it all: it is not surprising to learn that Essex is the local authority with the second-highest traffic level in the country, with 9.68 billion vehicle miles in 2017 alone. That is 2 billion miles more than in 1997, and if the unitary authorities of Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea are included, the greater Essex area has the highest traffic level by distance, with 11.2 billion miles. To put that into perspective, it is equivalent to the distance from Earth to interstellar space, so it is fair to say that we in Essex spend a lot of our time on the roads.

Despite Essex’s strategic location, the importance of ports, airports, roads and rail, and the work of our businesses and local authorities—I pay tribute to my colleagues in Essex County Council, who have put Essex’s transport infrastructure at the heart of their policy making and the representations they bring to Westminster through us, their Members of Parliament—our transport infrastructure, especially our roads, is at capacity. Our roads have reached their limits and it is beyond a joke.

It is important that we grow and take strategic advantage of our location and boost our global trade links—of course it is—but there has to be a recognition in our location and boost our global trade links—of our location and boost our global trade links—of Government that we are being held back by key parts of infrastructure, have been ensuring that we lean in—I think that is the right term—with the advocacy that has been brought to this place and the Government. My right hon. Friend’s point about roads and housing is timely, because I am just about to speak about key schemes and the whole issue of where the pressure points are.

A number of important projects and schemes need to be backed by the Government and progressed to ease the pressure on infrastructure. The costs of investing in the schemes will be paid back. We can work out the return on investment and the number of jobs that will be created through the investment and the subsequent tax receipts. Dynamic modelling facilitates and enables that.

I want to focus on two particular schemes for important strategic roads in the east of England that traverse the Witham constituency. I think we could all write books on both roads—history books, I dare say. There is a long history of delays and congestion, but their futures are linked. They are also connected to the potential future housing and development growth plans around mid-Essex and the Witham constituency. The delays caused by congestion are worse than inconvenient; they have a devastating impact on local communities and the economy. An additional half-hour delay every day for some of our great logistics businesses can mean a loss of tens of thousands of pounds a year. We hear that all the time as Members of Parliament, but it is no good just sitting and agreeing with my constituents and businesses; we need to put our foot on the gas and do something.

In debates on Brexit, the future relationship, supply chains and border checks, we need to ensure that we also look at how our inadequate infrastructure is hindering basic supply chains in our county and in the country as a whole. The delays caused by traffic and congestion on key strategic roads could be far more damaging to our economy, particularly in Essex, because of the infrastructure. The case for investment in the A12 and the A120 is compelling and has been recognised, but there are some major barriers, and that is what I want to focus on.

Back in the 2014 autumn statement, the Government announced their commitment to invest in and support the widening of the A12 between junction 19 at the Boreham interchange and junction 25 at Marks Tey. It was part of a major announcement that we all welcomed on a number of strategic road upgrades for the east of England. The work was described as an investment to “begin phase 1 of a major upgrade to the A12, with the addition of a third lane between Chelmsford and Colchester”.

That decision was long-awaited and welcomed by everyone: commuters, business and our local authorities. It also opened up the prospect of further widening north of Marks Tey in later phases. It was rightly a phased scheme.

I think all Members here travel on the A12—I travel on that stretch every week. We all see the problems, the congestion and the need to expand capacity. Highways England has stated that
“the road is almost past its capacity. Motorists regularly experience major delays at peak times. Up to 90,000 vehicles travel between junction 19 and 25 every day. Forecasts reveal that the traffic on the A12 will exceed capacity by 2038. Congestion will increase if nothing is done to address this problem.”

Three fatal collisions and 12 serious accidents were identified in a five-year period. Concerns were raised about the eight junctions on this stretch, with problems including “below standard slip roads and capacity problems which can result in tailbacks.”

The condition of the road is also poor, so a comprehensive widening scheme offers a chance to improve the surface of the road. The widening scheme also comes with the prospect of altering junctions to better suit local needs and alleviate pressures on local roads. For example, a new junction by Kelvedon to better connect to roads into Tiptree has the prospect of alleviating congestion and traffic through Kelvedon and Feering. That part of Essex had been neglected and ignored for too long, so we need to crack on with developing the widening scheme. It was prioritised to get it started in the first road investment strategy, or RIS1.

A range of stakeholder engagement activities took place. I give credit to Highways England for how it worked with us at the time. There were many events where it looked at options through route alignment. Engagement took place with parish—I sat with parish councils—district, borough and county councils, as well as the business community and local residents. It all seemed to be going well. There was consensus on the approach being taken by Highways England. With Braintree District Council and Colchester Borough Council in the process of updating their local plans, there was supposed to be integrated working and engagement to ensure that the widening scheme and local plans complemented each other—that speaks to the point that my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) made about housing—and did not compromise one another. Throughout stakeholder meetings the issue was raised and it was thought that the work between Highways England and the councils would ensure a smooth process and collaboration and joint working would naturally maximise the benefits of the widening scheme. That all made sense.

After that work, Highways England went out to public consultation in early 2017, presenting four options to the public. Option 1 was to widen across the current route alignment. Option 2 was to widen the western side on the current route with a new alignment from just before junction 22 to junction 25. Option 3 was a realignment between junctions 22 and 23. Option 4 was a realignment between junctions 23 and 25. The consultation process was a massive exercise with more than 18,000 people attending public exhibitions and more than 900 responses received. It was backed by our local councils, which raised no objections to the consultation or the options put forward at the time.

The outcome was due a year later in early 2018, when Highways England was scheduled to announce its preferred route alignment. That would have enabled further consultation to take place, a development consent order to commence and diggers to go into the ground in 2020. In fact, the position and timetable were made clear in an email from Highways England on 29 September 2017. The email gave an update on the consultation, stating that “key issues were raised relating to other major developments in the area, environmental impacts, non-motorised service provision and safety related issues. The independent analysis of the responses received, as well as a Report on Public Consultation will be published when a preferred route is announced.”

The email went on to reference the importance of giving careful consideration to “emerging and proposed major developments”. Highways England said that it had “decided to extend our options selection assessment and expect to announce the preferred route this coming winter.” It then went on to confirm the timescale, stating: “Following the preferred route announcement, we will undertake detailed engagement with all affected landowners and hold a further consultation, giving local communities and other stakeholders a second chance to have their say. This consultation is likely to be held in spring 2018 and will include detailed plans of a preferred route... Despite extending our options assessment, the first phase of construction is still anticipated to start in 2020.”

In October 2017, the Minister wrote to advise me that owing to a review of RIS1 and some rescheduling of schemes, there could be a three to six-month delay to the scheme. I questioned that and the Minister confirmed that “the recently announced optimisation of the Road Investment Strategy relates to the start of works and does not impact on the decision about the route. I want to reassure you that the Government and Highways England’s strong commitment to this scheme remains. While the start of construction will get delayed by 3-6 months as part of Highways England’s plans to reduce disruption for road users and businesses, Highways England will work with you and other local partners to ensure that any impacts are minimised.” At the end of 2017, therefore, the position with the A12 widening scheme was that an announcement and further consultation on the preferred route were to start shortly, with construction likely to start in 2020, probably later in the year owing to some rescheduling work. There was no indication from the Government or Highways England of the bombshell that was about to knock the scheme off course.

Two years after the consultation was completed, we are no further forward with this key scheme, so we have to ask where is the delay and where has it gone wrong? We know that Colchester Borough Council made a last-minute change to its housing and development plans: plans that had been in the making for years were abruptly changed. They redrew on the map the garden settlement community proposals in a way that completely blew apart the options in the A12 consultation, adding costs to the scheme and pushing the scheme back into RIS2. It has profound consequences for strategic investment across the region. It pushes back opportunities to widen the A12 north of Marks Tey, and it has an impact on the A120 dualling scheme, which I will come on to shortly. It also means that the A12 widening scheme could take place at the same time as the construction of the lower Thames crossing, putting pressure on construction costs and supply chains. That means adding congestion to the county.

I do not want to go over the past, in particular the local development plans, but constituents living in the vicinity of the A12 and the proposed realignments from the 2017 consultation are in limbo, creating too much
uncertainty. According to my postbag, people cannot decide whether to sell their homes or move. Huge inconvenience has been caused by the local plan triggering a chain of events. We need to look at the whole issue. We cannot progress the road until we have the housing scheme in place. In fact, the Minister for Housing was in touch with me in September last year. He also referred to the delays and said the issue “highlights the need for greater certainty of the funding and feasibility of these two schemes”, in relation to housing.

A written parliamentary answer from the Department in January this year stated:

“The Department for Transport and Highways England have been considering how best to take forward the A12 scheme, in the light of concerns raised by the Planning Inspector in June 2018 regarding the proposed Garden Community at Marks Tey and its interaction with the A12 scheme.”

The situation is now becoming absurd. The roads will not progress until the housing and development plans have progressed, but those plans will not progress until the roads have progressed. What has happened? We need answers now. What about the principle of alignment and integrated working? The matter must be addressed sooner rather than later.

I have specific questions for the Minister. At what point will the Government step in to take control of the A12 scheme and work with local authorities to provide the leadership that they need to drive the matter forward? When will the Government, the Department for Transport, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and the Treasury make a decision on progressing the scheme if the local plan is subject to delay? How much longer will we have to wait? Will the Minister ensure that, as a matter of urgency, Highways England brings forward a proposed route alignment that is future-proofed so that housing proposals can evolve around it? We cannot continue to wait.

What assessment have the Government made of the economic impact of the delays, which bring additional uncertainty. According to my postbag, people cannot decide whether to sell their homes or move. Huge inconvenience has been caused by the local plan triggering a chain of events. We need to look at the whole issue. We cannot progress the road until we have the housing scheme in place. In fact, the Minister for Housing was in touch with me in September last year. He also referred to the delays and said the issue “highlights the need for greater certainty of the funding and feasibility of these two schemes”, in relation to housing.

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What assessment have the Government made of the economic impact of the delays, which bring additional costs, and of the impact on other strategic road schemes such as the A120 dualling scheme? What work is being done to support my constituents who live so close to the A12 that they are stuck? They are unable to sell their properties or even determine their futures. They are victims of the failure to get the scheme going.

Does the Minister recognise that the delays to the A12 widening scheme between junctions 19 and 25 are causing delays to widen the A12 north of junction 25, which local people in the county need to see? I want to be part of the solution and we all need to come together, so will the Minister agree to set up a working group that is led by me and brings together Highways England, his Department, MHCLG, the Treasury, our colleagues at Essex County Council, the business community and other stakeholders to get on top of the widening scheme, as well as the A120 proposal? We cannot run the risk of this issue moving into RIS3. The delays are phenomenal and have an enormous impact, which brings me on to the A120, a road of strategic importance not only to the county, but to our country.

The A120 is a strategic economic corridor that cannot be underestimated. The Minister and all Members in the debate today know the history of the single carriageway.

In total, the scheme can add £2.2 billion in gross value added to the local economy at a cost of £550 million. Few schemes are as attractive as this one. The Minister knows it is one of the best prepared business cases for RIS2 because of the evidence contained in it. The feasibility work was supported by Government funding.
for which I thank the Government and the Minister, after lobbying by myself and others to put the project forward. That case has been made consistently.

The Government have committed to dualling the scheme; we now need the backing. Minister. We need to ensure that there are no contradictions between the Department, Highways England or local authorities. I would welcome an update from the Minister on the timetable for submissions for RIS2 and on the decision making. It is pivotal to securing the road, and strengthening our infrastructure across the county. The A12 and the A120 need to be sequential.

I would welcome an assurance from the Minister that the delays to the A12 widening scheme will not hamper or hinder in any way the proposals for the A120 dualling scheme to be included in RIS2. With the road currently operating beyond belief in terms of capacity, people need certainty. We are looking for a fresh impetus so that we can recalibrate both schemes and take a stronger, fresh approach to secure the Government’s national mission to build more new homes. There is a willingness in our county to be resilient and to ensure that we do everything that we can.

I have a few other points to make, and then I will give colleagues time to speak. There are other roads across Essex. The lower Thames crossing will provide a vital link connecting Essex and Kent. I would welcome a progress report from the Minister on that scheme, and on whether there will be connectivity. We are all about connectivity and joined-up, integrated working. We must ensure that the schemes are delivered on time and progress on time, and that Essex County Council is supported in the right way in the work that it needs to do to achieve that integrated approach across the county, so that all road schemes are progressed in the right way. My colleagues will speak about other roads. I think it is fair to say that road investment is pivotal, not just for Essex County Council but for the Government in terms of delivering for the county of Essex.

I will turn to a different modality; rail. I thank the Department for Transport and the Rail Minister for the amount of time that he has spent with me recently. As the Government have recognised, the Great Eastern main line and the West Anglia main line are poor relations to other parts of the rail network. I am chair of the Great Eastern main line taskforce, which was established back in 2013. The then Chancellor of the Exchequer supported the establishment of the taskforce to look at the strategic rail needs of the region. We have been an instrumental voice in putting business cases to the Government. The first business case that went to the Government in 2013 secured some important outcomes, off the back of a very robust rail prospectus that colleagues and I worked towards.

We released a package of investments that were linked to a new franchise, including new rolling stock and timetable changes. The package amounted to £4.5 billion in gross value added to the region’s economy, meaning thousands of new jobs. We are now interested in moving the scheme forward, and are working with the Government on the new process by submitting a revised and updated rail prospectus. We intend to restate the economic benefits, which can of course be multiplied. A multiplier effect in rail can be complemented by a multiplier effect in road investment; I argue that the two must almost be coterminous.

We will clearly restate what investment in the Great Eastern main line should look like, and that it should be focused on as a national economic priority. I know that it is not in the Minister’s portfolio, but I would welcome an update on a number of project schemes for which we are seeking commitments and support, including the introduction of a passing loop in the vicinity of Witham, the redoubling of Haughley junction, improvements to the Trowse swing bridge, resignalling south of Chelmsford, and Liverpool Street station improvements.

Combined, those key investments will increase capacity on the network and, importantly for all rail users, reduce delays. There are some long-awaited new developments, including Beaulieu Park railway station—or, as some call it, Chelmsford parkway—which will support new housing growth. A three-track or four-track option with additional platforms would serve to future-proof the line and to increase capacity.

We also need investment in infrastructure to implement digital railway technology for the Great Eastern main line, and to bring in the new 15-minute Delay Repay system, along with new technology to help commuters claim compensation for poor and delayed services, which have resulted in a lack of investment in the past. I know that we are getting close to an announcement on Delay Repay 15. The Minister might be limited in what he can say, because of commercial terms, but any signal that he can give regarding the direction of travel would be greatly welcome, including any improvements on the Witham to Braintree branch line.

I will draw to a close, as I have spoken for a considerable time and there are other speakers. From my perspective as a Member of Parliament for an Essex constituency, the chair of the Great Eastern main line taskforce, someone who has led the Essex Business, Transport and Infrastructure Forum, and someone who has worked—I think it is fair to say—quite diligently with my colleagues at Essex County Council, our deputy leader, Councillor Kevin Bentley, and all Members across Essex, there is a severe need for investment. The business cases have been made consistently to the Department and to various Ministers, including the Minister who is present today.

We are not shy as a county. I am proud of our diligence and our ability to understand economics, business and a return on investment. Essex is a net contributor to Her Majesty’s Treasury, and has been for a number of years—from the days when entrepreneurs sought to move to Essex. Our rail line has been under-invested in. The Minister knows the case for the A12 and the A120. I urge him to clarify the position on the development of both schemes. We cannot have further delay, or contradictions between what the Department says and what Highways England says.

We need an integrated way of working that involves Essex County Council, Highways England, the Department, and myself and other colleagues, so that we are all facing in the right direction and can deliver the economic benefits of jobs and housing, which we all want. It is important that the Government send a strong message to the county of Essex, investors, commuters, businesses, constituents and our local authorities, to say that we will work with them and support them to ensure that, as we say constantly, where Essex leads others will follow.

10.7 am

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for
Witham (Priti Patel) on securing the debate and making an excellent case. I have great admiration for her work in chairing the Essex Business, Transport and Infrastructure Forum, which I find invaluable in bringing together stakeholders across the whole county. Although I, of course, have a parochial interest in Rochford and Southend East, like my right hon. Friend I attended the University of Essex, and follow issues in that area in great detail. No doubt we will hear more from that neck of the woods soon.

Minister, if this were legislation, I would suggest a very simple amendment: delete “A” and insert “M”. I refer, of course, to the A127. We want it to be a motorway. When I say “we”, I do not mean me, or a collection of a few random individuals; the whole of Essex wants it to be a motorway. In November 2018, a group came together—the south Essex A127 taskforce—led by Councillor Mike Steptoe, who is both of Essex County Council and deputy leader of Rochford Council. That group included Essex, Southend, Thurrock, Rochford, Basildon, Castle Point, Brentwood, Chelmsford, Maldon, Havering, Transport for London and Highways England. Anyone who knows anything about transport and local politics will know that to get that number of local authority leaders and chief executives in one room agreeing anything is absolutely amazing. They want improvements to the A127.

The A127 carries more than 75,000 people every day. It is the lifeblood not only to the end of the road—almost literally where I live, in Thorpe Bay—but throughout Southend, Shoeburyness and across the corridor, into London. Rather like the c2c line, it is a pipeline of money and prosperity for the area. I am asking for just a small change—a little letter. I am sure the Minister will be able to manage something along those lines.

I have five more detailed asks. We would like the A127 widened, so that it would be at least three lanes along its length. We would like a consistent speed—at the moment, there is bit of stop/start and differential speed limits. We would like the road to be made a trunk road, part of the strategic network. At one point, the Government had a strong case against that because it just goes out to Southend, but now we have London Southend airport—an international airport that has grown massively, with more than 1 million passenger movements and flights to more than 30 destinations. From a transport perspective, that in itself makes Southend a strategic asset for the country, and on that basis alone the road should be trunked.

Fourthly, we need to make sure that all incremental improvements to the A127 do not stand in the way of a future motorway—developments such as the Fairglen interchange between the A130 and the A127 need to be motorway-proof. Finally, I am not a great negotiator, but just in case the Minister cannot offer me the small change of letter, perhaps he might go for another small change and call it the A127(M), while we wait for the full motorway in a few years’ time.

10.11 am

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I echo the comments congratulating my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) on securing this important and timely debate. I want to focus my remarks on Colchester, but will touch on a number of the different routes that she has already referenced. It has been a pleasure to serve with her on the Great Eastern main line taskforce, where we have made huge progress, although there is a lot of work still to do, and on the A120 and A12 campaigns.

Colchester is not only Britain’s oldest recorded town, but the fastest-growing town in the country, which it has been for some time. We have had tens of thousands of homes built without the adequate infrastructure to support that. Anybody who has visited Colchester, at peak times in particular, will have seen that there is considerable congestion and regular gridlock. Essex County Council, under the leadership of Councillor Kevin Bentley, is doing its best and there are some significant schemes under way in Colchester, but anybody in Colchester knows that that is not enough, and we need to secure further investment from the Government to keep our town moving.

Colchester has considerable potential: we have unbelievable links because of our location; we are central, for road, rail, air and sea; we are 50 minutes from the City of London, 30 minutes from Harwich international port and 45 minutes from London Stansted airport; we are the small and medium-sized enterprise capital of East Anglia; and we have around 600 creative and digital businesses, and that figure is growing almost by the day.

To unlock our town’s business and economic growth potential, we have to ensure that it does not regularly grind to a halt, as it badly does at the moment. For that, we need significant infrastructure investment. I want to focus on the large-scale infrastructure projects of the A12, the A120 and the Great Eastern main line, but we should not forget local transport infrastructure too.

The Government want Colchester Borough Council to build around 1,000 homes every year, and so far it has been hugely successful in that endeavour, building more than double of any other district or borough in the county of Essex. For that to be facilitated and for it to work—many in Colchester would question whether we should be building so much—the Government have to provide adequate transport infrastructure funding along with it. As a result, housing infrastructure fund bids are very important, and it is essential that the Government look favourably on those from our borough.

One example is the East of Colchester garden settlement plan. The garden settlement plan is not an uncontroversial programme in Essex, but the garden settlement to the east of Colchester is probably the less controversial of the two. It can work only if we secure funding for a new link road between the A133 and the A120, together with a rapid transport scheme to get people in and out of Colchester, because that will unlock the congestion on the Ipswich Road through Highwoods, St John’s and St Anne’s. That is the only way that the scheme can work, and I ask the Minister to look on it favourably.

My focus today is on the main projects—the A12, the A120 and the Great Eastern main line. While my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham was taking a sabbatical in the Cabinet, I stepped up and took on the chairmanship of the Great Eastern main line taskforce. Tens of thousands of commuters in and around my constituency use our station—certainly 15,000, and perhaps
20,000—and any one of those commuters will know that the Great Eastern main line is operating at capacity between Colchester and London. Given the growth pressure and the housing that the Government expect Essex to deliver, that is not sustainable.

We need infrastructure investment on the Great Eastern main line, and on projects already mentioned by my right hon. Friend—the Bow junction remodelling; the loops between Shenfield and Witham, probably the most important on the line; the loops south of Colchester; the Haughtley junction doubling; and, of course, the digital railway.

I sat on the Transport Committee with you, Mr Stringer, and we looked at the digital railway and the opportunity there to increase capacity by up to 40%. I was disappointed that we were not included as part of the initial pilot, despite the lobbying of every single MP on our line for the Great Eastern main line to be part of the digital railway pilot. I know Greater Anglia, our rail operating company, is looking into other options, but I implore the Government to look at this seriously, as capacity is a major issue and we know that the digital railway is an opportunity to unlock it. We have a brand-new fleet of trains on order, the first of which arrive this year. The equipment is therefore built into those trains already, and it is essential that we get the signalling right. Investment by the Government will unlock huge capacity on our line and, dare I say, enable the housing growth that the Government want to see.

That is part of why we must address capacity, but also, our commuters are not getting value for money. At peak times, they are very often standing. My Colchester commuters pay in excess of £5,000 a year for a season ticket, just to get to and from work. We must ensure that we deliver value for money for them.

My right hon. Friend touched on Delay Repay; I know it is not hugely relevant to the debate, so I will touch on it only briefly. We were promised that it would be delivered within weeks of the Adjournment debate a few weeks ago, so I push the Department for Transport to make that announcement as soon as possible. The eyes of rail users across north Essex and the wider region are certainly on the Department.

I very much welcome the new trains, but they are only part of the jigsaw. They will inevitably lead to fewer delays because we will have fewer train breakdowns and issues, but the Network Rail piece is equally important. I welcome the £2 billion Network Rail settlement, but I ask the Minister to make sure that it is delivered on time and that it is kept under close consideration, because we have to ensure the full jigsaw—the new trains along with signalling and track work—so that we are not suffering the delays we so frequently experience at the moment.

As my right hon. Friend mentioned, the A120 is one of the most important east-to-west roads in Essex, between Braintree and the A12. It is little more than a country lane on many parts of that route. Anybody who has tried to get between Braintree and Colchester and got stuck behind a caravan or a crash will know that people can be waiting there for a considerable period.

The A120 is the only single carriageway road in England connecting a major international airport with a major international seaport. As my right hon. Friend mentioned, the dualling was cancelled under the last Labour Government. Heaven forbid that we have another Labour Government in the near future, but would it not be a huge wasted opportunity if, 10 years on from the cancellation of the previous scheme, the current Government, just as we got round to delivering it, cancelled it all over again? I implore the Minister to get on with this and to make sure that A120 dualling is part of the road investment strategy, RIS2. That is absolutely vital. As eloquently and passionately put by my right hon. Friend, the reason is that the A120 is heavily over capacity.

Around 25,000 vehicles use that single-track road every single day—15% of them are heavy goods vehicles—and traffic volume is set to increase further year on year. Some 24% of the road is regularly congested. For five hours a day, journeys are delayed in both directions. For six hours a day, sections of the road carry more vehicles than it was built for.

As my right hon. Friend pointed out, we have an increasing collision trend, which should worry us all. There is a high rate of serious casualties compared with the national average for a single carriageway trunk road. Even if we park all those issues, which are compelling enough reasons to upgrade the A120, we have the even more compelling ground of economic growth. Essex County Council’s favoured option would see a benefit-cost ratio—my right hon. Friend has already pointed this out, but it is well worth repeating—of 4.5, which means that it would deliver £4.5 million of benefits for every £1 million spent, including unlocking up to 20,000 jobs and £2.2 billion in gross value added to the local economy. It is important to note that this option has wide support from businesses, local authorities, parliamentarians and business leaders. In mid and north Essex, we very much sing with one voice in calling on the Government to invest and ensure that we see that scheme as part of RIS2.

The A12 is another road that is hugely important—it is an artery through Essex. It is already approaching 70% and 90% in peak hours. From the many tweets I receive from my constituents, I know how many times they get stuck on that road. RIS1 identifies the whole route for upgrading to a three lane standard throughout, starting with the section between junction 19 at Boreham in Chelmsford and junction 25 at Marks Tey in Colchester.

We desperately want the Government to announce preferred route status for that section in RIS1. We accepted a short delay; when the Minister sent us the letter, we met him immediately afterwards and were told that it would be a delay of three to six months, which has drifted somewhat. We wanted that delivered as part of RIS1. Ideally, we then wanted the north of junction 25 on the A12 to be delivered as part of RIS2. That is absolutely vital to our county.

I want Highways England to look at my plan for a new junction at Lexden between junctions 26 and 28, because junction 27 has no southbound exit. There has been much growth in Stanway—mostly housing, but also the huge retail development at Tollgate. That is at junction 26. Likewise, at junction 28, we have future plans for the northern gateway—a huge leisure development. Those junctions will become more and more congested, so my plan for a new junction southbound on the A12 deserves serious consideration. I hope I can meet the Minister to discuss that further.
I have reiterated the points made by my right hon. Friend, but they are so important to our county and my town of Colchester. I want to emphasise that there is huge potential to unlock economic growth across Essex and in my home town of Colchester, but we need investment in our transport infrastructure to realise that potential.

10.23 am

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I welcome this morning’s debate and the case made by the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel) and the hon. Members for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) and for Colchester (Will Quince), who are all rightly standing up for their constituents in making the case for future transport investment. They have highlighted the A12, A120, A127—perhaps I should say M127—junction enhancements and the Great Eastern main line.

The Minister and I have debated transport infrastructure in the past 24 hours, not just focusing on Essex but looking across the country. Getting a national perspective is really important when we look at the microcosm of Essex and the opportunities the county offers. Both the Government and the Opposition see investment in the future of infrastructure as crucial, and it is something to which we are deeply committed. We are committed to transport infrastructure investment because we are committed to widening and unleashing the opportunities for the economy in Essex and across the country, and to ensuring that we get the connectivity right for the future.

Although right hon. and hon. Members have extolled the economic opportunities for their areas and discussed the housing developments that are putting pressure on the infrastructure, which is clearly under severe pressure and needs to be redressed, I urge the Minister to take a more strategic view of how we develop our transport infrastructure. The reality is that we need to plan not just for the next decade or two, but for the long term. Today we are living off our Victorian railway infrastructure, which has lasted for nearly 200 years, but we need a greater vision for how we want to drive infrastructure forward. Instead of hearing a list of pleas—I hear them very loudly—it is really important that we look more strategically at how and where we want to develop our economy, then mesh that with the housing demands across our country and ensure that there is good connectivity between economic opportunity and housing. We need to hardwire that into the infrastructure in order to meet those demands in future.

I heard the frustration of the right hon. Member for Witham when she asked which Department is leading—is it Housing or Transport? It is right to have interdependency, but there needs to be leadership in driving this forward. It is also important to draw together the necessary spatial planning between economic growth and housing, and we therefore need to ensure that transport is hardwired into all spatial planning in future.

As we look to the longer term and beyond the current crisis, we really need to think about infrastructure that will last in the long term. To be kind to the Government, the unfortunate way they handled RIS1 and CP5 highlights that this is still short-term thinking. Although we saw an improvement in year-on-year funding, moving to control periods or the RIS process has meant that we are still talking about short-term cycles of investment. The Rail Delivery Group has highlighted the damaging impact that short-term cycles of funding has created, particularly on the issue of skills—having to create skills, believing we are driving down one path of development of infrastructure, then seeing the cancellations and having to lay off those skills. That adds 30% to the costs for the industry—a premium that, frankly, we could be investing elsewhere.

It is really important that we heed what the sector is saying about planning, which is why Labour is very focused on long-term planning and rolling the money forward to ensure that there are sustained periods of funding. We very much hope that the Williams report will coincide with what we and the industry are saying: it is about removing the cliff edges from different control periods as we move forward on funding. If we can achieve that, we will be able to plan for the long term rather than just the short term. There are real benefits to looking at the infrastructure required to build sustainability for the long term.

The economic opportunity of Essex and the surrounding area is important because of the ports and airports connectivity. We therefore need to hardwire in the freight routes. We need to take one in seven lorries off the road and put them on to lines to ensure that they have priority. We must also ensure that we have the passenger infrastructure in place for the future, which is really important. I urge the Minister and right hon. and hon. Members to think more widely about the opportunities that can be delivered—particularly by rail, but also by light rail, which is being developed across different conurbations. We must certainly not focus only on urban areas; it must stretch into the surrounding rural areas. Great opportunities could be realised if we make serious investment in the longer term. Labour will certainly prioritise that in government.

As we move forward, we must embrace the modern technology that is available to us. I share the right hon. Lady’s disappointment that we have not embraced the opportunity of digital rail. We have heard evidence about its capacity benefits, but we are miles behind. Essex is leading in electronics—it is a major part of its economy—so it surely makes sense to bring digital rail into the region. Other countries are far more advanced than us and do not understand our delays and why we are just tiptoeing forward into digital rail. I share those concerns.

I urge the Minister, as I did yesterday, to justify the scale of the road building programme. Hon. Members will obviously make the case for their own areas, but 50,000 people die each year in the UK as a result of air pollution, so we must address emissions seriously. It is concerning that the carbon footprint of the transport sector, which accounts for 30% of emissions, is increasing. We need a 15% reduction year on year just to reach our Paris commitments, but of course that will not be enough to prevent the catastrophic global impact and the impact here at home.

The Minister will say that the Government are planning to remove diesel vehicles by 2040, but in 41 years’ time more than 1 million people in our country will have
died prematurely. That national crisis should be on the front pages of our newspapers daily until the Government address the issue. To date, I have not heard how they are planning to do so with the road building programme. Yesterday he said that I was rude to call it catastrophic, but the damage it is causing is indeed deeply catastrophic. I ask him to reflect more on the impact it is having. We are talking about lives being lost.

I hear right hon. and hon. Members’ pleas, but I urge them to think about the impact on the environment of these road-building schemes. We know from the evidence that, with induced capacity, we will be having the same debate in 20 years’ time. I therefore encourage them to think bigger about the infrastructure they want in Essex.

I want to highlight the opportunities for other modes of transport. Some 80% of journeys are local, so we could see a modal shift into active travel. We have not heard about cycling and walking today, but that infrastructure is important. Fantastic work has been done in Manchester, but it is important to extend that beyond the local vicinity. I ask the Minister why the Highways England budget for building infrastructure for cycling and walking along highways has been underspent. We really need to focus on active travel, so that seems like another missed opportunity by the Minister.

We have a real opportunity to invest in our infrastructure and our country, and to develop skills for the future. We have a skills crisis across the sector. I again ask the Minister to address that issue and ensure that, when bids come forward, we invest in jobs in transport construction so that we have the right skills in place. Although the Government are rightly focusing on unlocking the opportunity of electric vehicles, the investment in the infrastructure to support them is woeful. That does not give confidence to the manufacturers whose production the infrastructure to support them is woeful. That does not give confidence to the manufacturers whose production will be driven by the infrastructure. I again ask the Minister to have a laser focus on ensuring that we get the infrastructure right for a future generation of electric vehicles.

10.34 am

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. This has been a very interesting debate. Of course, the focus has rightly been on Essex infrastructure, but I am grateful to the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) for raising some other issues, and of course I will discuss them all.

Above all, I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) not only on securing the debate, but on her Churchillian 37-minute speech. That is a new record for me in a Westminster Hall debate. It was very wide-ranging and interesting. She has been absolutely tireless in pressing the claims of not merely her constituency but Essex as a county. She gives indefatigability a bad name. If it were not for our relentless desire to maintain efficiency in the Department for Transport, we would have Patel SWAT teams scrambling every time she moves, and cross-modal engagement klaxons going off every time we heard something. If we did that, we would hear an awful lot of noise, because she has been very active in this area.

I am also aware of the work that my right hon. Friend has done elsewhere—my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) touched on this—not just as head of the Great Eastern main line taskforce but as chair of the Essex Business, Transport and Infrastructure Forum, highlighting the importance of infrastructure in building sustainable local communities and strong local economies. That is all extremely welcome.

My right hon. Friend rightly focused on the natural, physical and human endowments that Essex has as a county. It has a very strong local economy and a resident population of 1.5 million odd people. It has a very entrepreneurial spirit and workforce, and the growing economy reflects that. It is a very exciting place to do business, and that is tremendous. That has drawn on and created a need for transport connectivity.

The nationally important M11 and M25, which colleagues did not mention, and the A12 and A120 run through the county, and there are major local roads, including the A13, the A27—my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East was very eloquent on that topic—the A100 and the A414. Rail connections ensure that the county remains tightly linked to London, with three main lines, the London underground to Upminster and branch lines serving more than 55 stations. It would be wrong not to mention its international gateway of Stansted and Southend, which is growing very rapidly, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham mentioned. Harwich provides nationally important sea connections to Holland and Denmark. There are also Tilbury and the new London Gateway port. It is a very exciting place.

My right hon. Friend mentioned Essex’s agricultural strength. It cannot quite match the astonishing range, diversity and depth of my county of Herefordshire, but it is right up there. As I am sure she will agree, the transport network is not just of critical importance to the economic growth and development of Essex, but of national significance. It is an important piece of infrastructure in its wider economic growth and development benefits across the country.

Let me touch on the issues that my right hon. Friend raised in some depth. She is right to focus on the importance of infrastructure. We have recognised that and have invested in the strategic road network, which is critical to delivering that growth. In December 2014 the Government launched the first road investment strategy, which outlined how more than £15 billion is to be invested in our strategic roads between 2015 and 2021. That is the biggest upgrade to strategic roads in a generation, and it will be exceeded in RIS2 from 2025, which is of the scale of £25 billion.

The hon. Member for York Central rightly drew attention to the importance of combating emissions. We have a very strong air quality strategy and have launched an enormous amount of work not just on emissions but on decarbonisation. We have a lot of work about to come out shortly on future mobility, electric vehicles and the like. It includes not just cars, but the full panoply of electric vehicles that are transforming our streets.

It is important to recognise that some road building is vital, and it would be a poor Minister who did not recognise both that and the validity of claims for road building in counties, not merely as an economic and housing enabler, but as an investment in skills, supply
chains and businesses, and one that will prepare us for a green future with electric and, in due course, autonomous vehicles.

Rachael Maskell: Will the Minister give way?

Jesse Norman: I have so much to get through in only 10 minutes. I will be delighted to come back to the hon. Lady when I mention her remarks later in my speech, but I will make the important point that we must recognise balance and that, even by her lights of supporting skills and reducing emissions in the longer term, this is actually an enlightened policy. Much of it is about maintenance—autonomous vehicles will require high-quality roads—and that process cannot begin too soon.

To zero-in on Essex, my right hon. Friend the Member for Forth witham pointed out that the first road investment strategy includes the widening of the A12 between junction 19 at Chelmsford and junction 25 at Marks Tey, where it currently joins the A120. Delivery of that scheme remains a top priority for my Department, as it is an important strategic route for continued economic prosperity across the region. She also highlighted the delays that have affected the scheme. I will not get into the causation, and she has been very delicate in hinting at causation without specifically stating it. As she knows, there was an initial re-profiling delay, but the fundamental delay was not at all of the Government’s making. Local priorities have changed and we are seeking to accommodate those changes. I will respond to her specific questions—we owe her that as she was kind enough to share them in advance—but I can assure the Chamber that we understand the frustration felt by local communities that works will not begin by March 2020 as was originally proposed. We very much understand that.

We have been considering how best to take forward the A12 scheme in the light of the interaction with the proposed garden community in Marks Tey, as my right hon. Friend touched on. That interdependency was of course raised by the Planning Inspectorsate, which examined those housing proposals in June 2018. We believe—as I think she does—that it is important to find the right long-term solution for the local community and to support delivery of the proposed housing at Marks Tey, which would mean the delivery of up to 24,000 much-needed homes.

Highways England is working with partners in Government, local planning authorities and promoters of the new housing development. The next step is for Highways England to consult on the revised route options for the A12 between junctions 24 and 25. The route options will have regard to the housing proposals and—we hope—ensure that the improvements are right for those who use the A12 now and in the future. In the light of the recent delays, Highways England’s latest delivery plan, which was published in July 2018, proposes that works for the A12 begin in the second road investment period, from 2020 to 2025. I wish that were otherwise, but we have had our hand forced somewhat and are scrambling to make the best of the situation.

As I am sure my right hon. Friend will also know, Essex has ambitious plans for housing delivery. The housing White Paper set out the Government’s wider vision to address issues such as unaffordable housing and the provision of proper transport infrastructure, and the Department works closely with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in that area. My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) mentioned housing infrastructure fund bids. They are a crucial part of Essex’s further development, and I say good luck to any hon. Member in the Chamber. Trying to tie in the response to those housing bids with local and strategic transport links is part of the importance of our wider strategic approach, unlocking new housing developments with good transport connections in places where people want to live. Essex is delivering that kind of substantial housing growth in major sites such as Braintree, Chelmsford and Marks Tey, which are critical to meet housing demand. Of course, we recognise the centrality of transport to making them happen.

Well-planned, well-designed and locally-led garden communities can play a vital role in helping to meet this country’s housing needs well into the future. That is why the Government recognise and have invested in the development of capacity towards 23 places across the country as part of our garden communities programme. We are pleased that Essex County Council has decided to further support North Essex Garden Communities by submitting a HIF bid. That has the potential to make an enormous difference, including by releasing funding that ensures that the proposed A12 improvements can accommodate and allow access to the garden communities at Marks Tey, subject to further public consultation.

There has been some concern that the delay to the A12 scheme will compromise the proposal to dual the A120 between Braintree and Marks Tey, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Forth witham mentioned. Essex County Council is developing that scheme for potential inclusion in the second road investment strategy. I can confirm that, from our perspective, the A12 delay does not affect or compromise consideration of the A120 scheme and that, although we cannot make announcements on the fly, I expect us to make a consolidated set of announcements on this area and others later in the year.

The A120 is recognised as an important route in the wider transport network, but currently the single-carriageway section between Braintree and the A12 near Colchester is regularly a bottleneck, as has been pointed out. The heavy traffic passing through the area is a burden on the local villages and towns. We have supported Essex County Council with a contribution of £4 million to the development work for an affordable and deliverable improvement scheme for the A120. I thank the council and take my hat off to Councillor Kevin Bentley, who is sitting in the Public Gallery, for their excellent work in developing those proposals, including taking them through a non-statutory public consultation on a range of options.

The council’s favoured option for the A120 scheme, which was announced in June 2018, is supported by a strong analytical assessment and has gained the backing of both the public and the local business community. It forms the foundation for consideration of the scheme as a candidate in the competition for the bidding process of our second road investment strategy, which focuses on the period between 2020 and 2025 and has been subject to enormous competition, as colleagues will understand. It is in the nature of politics that everyone regards their own bid as the only one that the Government
should ever meet and do so as a priority, and this debate has been no different. I remind colleagues that that can be said for every single Member of this House, and across all parties.

Submissions in favour of the A120 upgrade have been received but there was also support for the schemes that were originally included in RIS1 for development in RIS2, such as the A12 Colchester bypass widening that we discussed and the improvement of the A12-M25 to Chelmsford. They are all being considered for inclusion in RIS2, alongside other proposals from across the country.

Beyond the upgrades and improvement schemes, the Government continue to invest in essential maintenance of the network. For the period 2018-19, £34.8 million was allocated for Essex road maintenance, with a further figure of almost £700,000 earmarked for pothole action funding in the area. Through the local growth fund, we have also allocated £15 million to the proposed £28.7 million improvements to the A127-A130 Fairglen interchange, which will improve traffic flow, journey times and road safety at an important local junction. Essex County Council is developing the final business case and, if the scheme is approved, work could start in the summer of 2020 and be completed in early 2022.

My right hon. Friend rightly mentioned the lower Thames crossing. If ever there were a scheme that underlined—contrary to the shadow Minister’s suggestions—the genuinely strategic nature of the investment that this country is making, that would be it, with between £4.4 billion and £6.2 billion-worth of investment to increase capacity by 70% for drivers crossing the Thames to the east of London. That investment is orientated absolutely towards the longer term. A Government preoccupied with the short term could not make an investment of that scale or magnitude, or with such a degree of planning. It will almost double the road capacity across the River Thames to the east of London. It is the largest single road investment project in the UK since the M25 was completed more than 30 years ago.

Obviously, there is a need for better road connectivity between Essex and Kent, and we believe that the benefits of the lower Thames crossing are clear. We expect it to have a positive impact on the major road network, contribute to a reduction in the number of vehicles using the Dartford crossing—releasing some of the pressure on it—and assist and support local communities.

The other strategic connection is of course rail. My right hon. Friend mentioned the lower Thames crossing. If ever there were a scheme that underlined—contrary to the shadow Minister’s suggestions—the genuinely strategic nature of the investment that this country is making, that would be it, with between £4.4 billion and £6.2 billion-worth of investment to increase capacity by 70% for drivers crossing the Thames to the east of London. That investment is orientated absolutely towards the longer term. A Government preoccupied with the short term could not make an investment of that scale or magnitude, or with such a degree of planning. It will almost double the road capacity across the River Thames to the east of London. It is the largest single road investment project in the UK since the M25 was completed more than 30 years ago.

On Highways England designated funds, RIS2 is not yet completed so it is too early to say that money has not been spent, but we welcome further bids from local authorities and other interested parties. I am taking steps to increase the availability of designated funds in future.

Rachael Maskell: I was referring to RIS1, not RIS2.

Jesse Norman: Yes; RIS1 has not yet completed so it is premature to suggest that the money has not been used.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East seductively enticed me towards a tiny change of one letter to another—a wafer-thin change. I am grateful to him for that. He pointed out the importance of widening for consistent speeds, with the impetus on re-trunking with a focus on the airport. I understand that, but the key question is whether either the A127 or the A13 should be trunked. Discussions are happening, or are about to happen, with local councils on that question. I must make no judgment on the merits of the case—that is a matter for official scrutiny and discussion—but I would have some worries about the potential environmental impact. It is important that there be a properly wide-ranging conversation, and we are engaging on that. If my hon. Friend wishes to discuss that further, I would be happy to meet him.

My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester rightly pointed out the importance of HIF bids and the centrality of the new link road between the A133 and the A120, which he has called for. I cannot comment on the road, but his emphasis on road safety is right. I have addressed many of the other issues he raised already. I would be delighted to meet him to talk about the A12. It is important that we adopt a strategic approach when we have such meetings, not least because there has been a
lot of discussion with Essex MPs in any case on roads. We can have one-off meetings, but it is helpful to have them in the context of a wider strategic conversation.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham asked at what point a Government Minister will give leadership. I have explained that we are still reliant on a series of local decisions. I would be delighted to meet her to discuss the best way to take forward the A12 scheme. Once those housing proposals are settled, we will be in a much better place. Highways England, which works closely with Essex County Council and other district councils in promoting garden communities and developing the realignment options for the A12, is not in a position—neither are we—to commit now to a realignment of the A12. That is potentially a very significant additional cost, but may prove not to be needed in the event that the housing proposals do not go ahead. She is right to maintain the tempo and we will meet her on that, but we are reliant on decisions made locally. I understand that the council has agreed to undertake the work requested by the inspector; that is scheduled to be completed by June 2019, with a public consultation expected in autumn 2019. With luck, decisions on route alignment can be made in a co-ordinated fashion after that.

My right hon. Friend asked what assessment the Government may have made on the impact of the delays on the economy and on other strategic road schemes. We are acutely aware of the economic impact, which is why it is a priority for us to ensure that we get the right solution across all the considerations. The Government have made it clear that we are committed to strategic road schemes such as the A120 dualling and the delays. We also believe that the A12 scheme delays should not affect the prospects for the A120 proposal or compromise its consideration for inclusion in RIS2.

My right hon. Friend asked what has been done to support constituents who live close to the A12 and are unable to sell properties, and the victims of blight. I have massive sympathy for people in that situation—it goes with uncertainty about these decisions. We have not been the cause of that uncertainty. There are established rules about property and compensation for residents affected by major infrastructure proposals. They apply in this case, but I understand the human cost of the delay.

My right hon. Friend asked whether I recognised that the delays to the A12 widening scheme might delay plans to widen the A12 north of junction 25. The scheme to widen the A12 Colchester bypass was included along with the Chelmsford bypass in RIS1. These are being developed as potential candidates for RIS2, along with the proposed A120 scheme and other proposals across the country. We are determined to run a fair process on the merits, but the merits of Essex are considerable, so we hope they will be successful.

I recognise the importance of the county of Essex as a driver of growth and a source of much-needed housing. However, there are also further opportunities for the region to take advantage of Government funding and investment, such as the housing infrastructure fund, and I urge colleagues and Essex County Council to renew their excellent work in developing a robust, evidence-based case for the inclusion of their schemes in the second road investment strategy.

Priti Patel: I thank all colleagues for their contributions, and the Minister and his team for his very considered and detailed response. I do not need to press him on anything in particular, but I thank him for the opportunity to meet and follow up with him on the need for a working group, to ensure that we stay on track and pursue the integrated way of working across the Department, Highways England, local authorities and Members of Parliament. There is a lot of work to do, and we are all committed to supporting each other to deliver for our communities and for the county of Essex.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered transport infrastructure in Essex.
Civil Nuclear Constabulary: Pensions

10.59 am

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the pensions of Civil Nuclear Constabulary officers.

This is an opportunity to set out the case for the Civil Nuclear Constabulary’s pension age to be set at 60. That is not just a common-sense position but an urgent issue of national security. I am sure we can all agree that the effectiveness of the Civil Nuclear Constabulary is essential for maintaining the UK’s nuclear security.

The job with which the CNC is charged must be clearly understood as part of any discussion about the retirement age of its officers. In partnership with the civil nuclear industry, national security agencies and regulatory bodies, the CNC deters any attacker whose intent is the theft or sabotage of nuclear material, whether static or in transit. It defends such material and will recover it should it be seized. Such dangerous work means that all CNC officers are heavily armed and are required to meet demanding levels of physical fitness. In addition, they are employed as armed officers alongside other UK armed police, as we have seen in recent operations following terror attacks. They play a crucial role in keeping us—the public—safe, and theirs is one of the most dangerous professions to enter.

The prospect of a retirement age of 67, rising to 68, is causing real concern to CNC officers. The chief constable of the CNC has warned that the change to the retirement age would render the service “unsustainable” and is undoubtedly creating “insurmountable” difficulties for CNC officers and the mission they seek to fulfil. Indeed, that unrealistic retirement age is already damaging recruitment. Police Oracle reports that turnout among CNC personnel has deteriorated, rising to 12%. The Civil Nuclear Police Federation says that the force is 142 authorised firearms officers under strength and has seen 79 unscheduled leavers since April 2018, with 32 signalling their intention to quit recently and recruitment numbers decreasing by half. Alarmingly, one in every eight CNC officers is leaving for another force or heading for civvy street.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech. Does she agree that the CNC’s size means that if an officer were injured or unable to carry the equipment it would be practically impossible, or certainly very difficult, to redeploy that officer within the force? That has to be considered as a factor in arguing that the default pension age should be 60.

Patricia Gibson: Absolutely. That is a very important point. When any of these officers suffers an injury in the line of duty, the service has a duty of care to look after them until they are fit to return to duty. They will not necessarily be on sick leave the whole time, but it is difficult to redeploy them because of the nature of the work they undertake.

It is not difficult to see why the number of CNC officers has been eroding. CNC officers have been categorised as public sector workers for the purpose of their pension, meaning that full benefits kick in only at age 67 or 68, whereas conventional Home Office police officers are able to retire at 60. Does the Minister think that disparity fair, given that CNC officers are expected to carry five different weapons and 30 kg of heavy equipment at the age of 65-plus, as they are charged with protecting UK nuclear assets and acting as a vital armed reserve force? If these officers’ retirement age is not given parity with the rest of the police service, there can be little doubt that it will continue to damage the recruitment and retention of CNC officers.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Lady from the bottom of my heart on bringing this debate forward. Although I represent the far north of Scotland, this issue is every bit as big to my constituents who serve in the force at Dounreay. I recognise the contribution they make, which she outlined, in assisting Police Scotland in its endeavours. Surely, the loss of skills as people leave the force represents a misuse of money. A lot of money is spent training these officers up, so it seems to me that public money is poured down the drain if they leave altogether and go to civvy street.

Patricia Gibson: Absolutely. That is a very important point, which I need not add to. I am sure the Minister is listening. That loss of skills is extremely concerning.

The damage to the recruitment and retention of CNC officers can only compromise, perhaps dangerously, the effectiveness of the force, and it could have extremely serious consequences for public safety. In addition, if we expect such exacting standards of CNC officers, while demanding that they wait until 68 to retire, of course there will be a temptation for ageing officers who know their job could be under threat to mask health conditions that may undermine their performance.

We all know that most public sector workers are now expected to work for longer. However, there are exceptions for certain classes of worker, and it seems obvious that CNC officers should be included in those exceptions. Perhaps the Minister can explain why conventional police officers will continue to retire at 60 but CNC officers will not. What is the logic for that? Despite that fact, CNC officers must meet much higher standards of physical fitness to keep their jobs. Conventional police officers perform firearms duties as an optional part of their duties and can relinquish them as they get older. Every single CNC officer is required to be fully trained in firearms, and they cannot relinquish firearms duties as they get older; they are an inherent part of their duties. In addition, the requirement for CNC officers to retain a very high standard of fitness until the age of 67 or 68 discriminates against women, since only an elite standard of fitness is expected to be sufficient for those aged over 60 to continue their duties.

The vast majority of public servants will be able to draw down a full pension. Should a public service employee choose to retire early, they will have 6% of their pension deducted for each year they retire early. The problem for CNC officers is that they are not choosing to retire early; they are being forced out because of physical inability to maintain obligatory standards of physical fitness and weaponry skills. CNC officers are likely to have their careers terminated as they approach the higher retirement age, and they will see their pensions reduced, perhaps by up to 25% to 30%, as a result. That considerable financial penalty is proving a major career disincentive. In such a situation, how can the CNC stem the decline in recruitment and retention?
I hope the Minister does not respond by telling us that we are all living longer and that keeping the CNC retirement age at 60 would set a dangerous precedent. The CNC is asking only for the same provisions that are in place for conventional Home Office police officers.

Let us turn our attention to costs. Perhaps the Minister will find it reassuring to learn that the CNC has done its own cost modelling, which shows that the gross cost of a retirement age of 60 versus the current plans would be only £4.4 million per year from 2023 to 2030 and £5.2 million a year in the long run. In the short run, those costs would be more than offset by extra case management costs, early retirement and compensation costs, so keeping the retirement age at 60 would produce a net saving of £4.3 million a year. In the long run, once compensation costs were paid, the net saving would be around £1.9 million per year.

Make no mistake, the Civil Nuclear Police Federation has accepted the potential for increased employee contributions to cover increases in costs. That means there is no real financial obstacle to correcting the unfairness between police services created by the Public Service Pensions Act 2013 and securing the UK’s nuclear safety.

I say to the Minister that increasingly this fine service has been rendered ineffective, due to the dithering and delay from his Government’s unwillingness to resolve the issue.

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. Does she agree that with the addition of the £40 million CNC training facility at Sellafield, where we have the biggest CNC employment base, and with the nuclear future we are looking forward to, it is more important than ever that we ensure we have a CNC fit for the future?

Patricia Gibson: Absolutely. I applaud the new training facility that the hon. Lady mentions, but I am sure that many CNC officers would see an irony in investing in training when there is a serious recruitment and retention crisis. There has to be more joined-up thinking.

We know that potential recruits are looking elsewhere and serving officers are voting with their feet. If the UK Government are not willing to listen to CNC officers and continue to deny the truth that everyone in this Chamber can see, perhaps the Minister will explain why his Government have set a pension age for this service which he and they know full well cannot be realistically reached by those who put themselves in harm’s way to keep us safe. Does he accept that if this service continues to be eroded as it has been in recent years—the Government were warned that it would be three years ago and the truth of that is becoming clearer every single day—it will be for his Government to explain its decisions if there is a situation where nuclear security in the UK is compromised? The service will continue to erode unless action is taken.

As this service is eroded, every single CNC officer’s job becomes more unsafe and more dangerous. As the Minister’s Government dither and delay, the welfare, wellbeing and morale of our 1,250 CNC officers is being undermined. That is simply unacceptable. In today’s context, nobody needs to be reminded of the increased importance of the role these officers play in keeping us safe.

CNC officers do not want the Minister to stand up and pay them compliments about their bravery and the value of their work. They do not want platitudes; they want action, commitment and parity with conventional officers. I know that the Minister is sympathetic and that there is sympathy on the Government Benches for CNC officers. It is time to get this matter sorted. It has already dragged on for far too long and every day is doing more damage to the service.

If the Government do not see, or will not pay attention to, the evidence that is staring them in the face, they should not be surprised if we see serious and catastrophic consequences for national security. The CNC will undoubtedly struggle increasingly to fulfil its important mission of protecting the UK’s civil nuclear sites at home or in transit, and to supplement the resources of armed conventional officers as a part of the strategic armed policing reserve and Operation Temperer.

I urge the Minister to be mindful of the fact that this debate is not just about pensions. It is not about pounds and pence. Ultimately, it is about whether or not his Government think nuclear security, public safety and national security are worth paying for and valuing, and how much he and his Government believe they matter. I know that those things matter to everyone in the Chamber and to my constituents in North Ayrshire and Arran, in which the nuclear site of Hunterston sits. We all know it matters. What are his Government willing to do, in the face of a mountain of evidence, to show that they too believe that the work, health, wellbeing, careers, and, ultimately, the safety of our CNC officers matter?

11.14 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Stringer, as, indeed, on other mornings and afternoons.

I thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for securing the debate. I know that is a platitude and she asked me not to use platitudes, but I felt I ought to say that. She and I have been involved in quite a few things together, always on opposite sides, but I hope we have a mutual respect and she knows I am doing my best to resolve the issue. I cannot disagree with a lot of what she said—that is the last platitude, I promise.

The other Members who intervened showed their commitment to everything that goes on with nuclear in their areas. I mention first my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), not because she is on my side of the House, but because rarely a week goes by without us meeting two or three times, including the night before last, when we met the Secretary of State. I have had discussions on these matters with the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) and the hon. Member for Liverpool on many occasions, and I am always available to them for further discussion.

Jamie Stone: Will the Minister give way?

Richard Harrington: Of course, although I was just getting going.
Jamie Stone: I thank the Minister for giving way. There is a level of frustration. I appreciate the kindness of nature in his having discussions, but, as the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) said, there is frustration over the continuing delay, which has gone on for years. Could we all keep it our mission to try to reach a positive conclusion?

Richard Harrington: I utterly accept that point. I must apologise to the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) for mixing up Hartlepool and Liverpool; I do not know why I did it. I hope the hon. Gentleman is not too offended. Perhaps it is because I come from Leeds, which is between the two. I got mixed up.

I am not going to say how important the Civil Nuclear Constabulary is to the nuclear industry, because everybody knows that. One of my early visits, and one of the most significant I have had in this job, was to Sellafield, where I saw the training centre. I did not just have a tour; I also saw how heavy the kit is, I spoke to a lot of officers and I heard about the training regimes they undertake. I do not think I could walk around all day and be fully mobile with the kit they have to wear and carry. I fully accept the level of fitness that is required. Chief Constable Mike Griffiths, who is about to leave the force, explained it clearly to me. He transformed the CNC so that it has become the modern force it is today.

The CNC is moving to the new pension scheme on 1 April next year. I have been keen to hear evidence and representations on the effect of the higher pension age on the effectiveness of the force. We engage with the CNC and the Civil Nuclear Police Federation, which I met last year, and I am well aware of their views. As soon as those views were brought to my attention, I contacted the Treasury and others in Government to try to resolve the issue. The least I could do was hear their representations—that is my job, as I am doing today—but I fully accept the importance of getting the matter resolved as quickly as possible.

I have contacted the Cabinet Office, because it administers the civil service pension scheme. The Treasury is responsible for public pensions policy and I have set out the arguments on the Floor of the House, a real lack of understanding at the heart of Government of what these officers are required to do, the challenges they face and the importance of the role they play.

The capabilities are very complex. The two tests of fitness and firearms capability determine whether an officer is deployable. It is the officer’s capability, rather than age, that is the determining factor, and I think that must be the right approach. Being in the age range of those who would be in such a position, as I was explaining to the hon. Lady before the debate started, I admit that, although some people are vastly fitter than I am, I would find it very difficult myself at my age of 61. I know it is harder for older officers to attain the fitness standards, but the College of Policing independently determines the standard that authorised firearms officers must achieve to do their job effectively and safely. That is a matter of national security and I accept that it cannot be compromised.

The Public Service Pensions Act legislated to introduce the link between scheme normal pension age and state pension age for most public service pension schemes, to ensure that the cost over the long term remains sustainable. I will not go further into that, because the hon. Lady marked my card that I might, and she does not want platitudes about people getting older. She is quite right, so I will not say it, but we must accept the fact that, in the end, all public service schemes have to be funded and public service employees have to work for longer.

In certain areas—prison officers are another case—there are not a lot of back-office jobs that people who are older can do. In the police force generally, there are plenty of those functions; I do not just mean some back-office clerical function, because there are many things that are less active but still fully contribute to the objectives of a particular police force. I accept that nuclear is one sector where that is less possible, because there just are not many similar functions.

The equality analysis accepted that it is harder for older female officers to attain such high fitness standards. A pension scheme has to be fair to females too, because they have a flatter career trajectory for that reason. The proposed pension scheme, alpha, is a career average earnings scheme rather than a final salary scheme. Changed contribution rates under this scheme will help employees with shallower career trajectories, which...
Richard Harrington historically means women rather than men, although, obviously, male officers in the same position will also benefit.

I will also highlight the ill-health retirement provisions. We recognise that CNC officers have a higher rate of musculoskeletal disorders from carrying the heavy kit. The ill-health retirement provisions in their current pension scheme are quite strict and allow an ill-health retirement only where the officer is not capable of any other work. Consequently, officers who gain an ill-health retirement are not allowed to do any work after their exit from the force.

The alpha scheme, however, gives its members choice and recognises that it is desirable for people to continue working if they are able. It affords a lower tier of benefit to those who are unable to continue working in their role or a comparable one, so an officer could leave the CNC with an ill-health pension but still gain employment elsewhere to supplement their income and have a full working life in a more suitable job.

I am very aware of the current retention issues affecting the constabulary. I have been informed that there have been an unusually high number of resignations—in the last month alone there were 26—and that 19 officers are moving across to the Ministry of Defence Police. I do not think that the evidence presented is strong enough to draw a direct link between the current retention issues facing the CNC and the move to a different pension scheme, since many of the officers resigning are moving to a force that has the same pension scheme that the Civil Nuclear Police Federation is resisting.

I also do not consider the current retention issues facing the CNC to be a national security crisis. The CNC has assured us that it can operate with its current force strength, albeit officers are being asked to do overtime. If that changes, I will re-evaluate my position, but the CNC is still policing our nuclear sites to its required regulatory strength and our nuclear estate remains secure. I am grateful for the explanation and arguments that the hon. Lady and other colleagues have given today.

Patricia Gibson: I thank the Minister for his response, but can I ask him to explain something? I know that a lot of CNC officers do not understand this, and I do not either: why has a retirement age for CNC officers been set that, realistically, they cannot reach?

Richard Harrington: I do not accept the hon. Lady’s premise that realistically those officers cannot reach it. I accept that some of them cannot, but obviously some people can and some cannot; I mentioned myself, but many people are far fitter than me in doing that job and other dangerous jobs in society.

The hon. Lady told me—I know this is not your fault, Mr Stringer—that she had applied for this debate quite some months beforehand. I am glad we have had the debate, but if that happens in the future, she is welcome to contact me directly to discuss issues such as this. That would perhaps not be in such a public forum, but if she finds the system frustrating and she cannot get a debate, she is welcome to contact me.

In summary, I have met everyone concerned in this matter. I am pushing colleagues in the Treasury and the Cabinet Office, and I would like to see it resolved as soon as I possibly can.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.
Housing Associations and Public Contractors: Freedom of Information

[Mr Clive Betts in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered extending the Freedom of Information Act 2000 to housing associations and public contractors.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. This issue is very dear to my heart and, I know, to those of several colleagues. I am pleased to see the hon. Members who have attended, particularly the Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), who is here on his 60th birthday. I will try to keep my remarks on this complex and interesting topic within reasonable bounds.

I start by referring to a report from BuzzFeed News this morning on the specialist police unit that investigates crimes against MPs, which has received 558 complaints since it was set up after the tragic death of our colleague Jo Cox in 2016. Those complaints include four assaults, five bomb threats, seven hoax noxious powders, four reports of trespassing and 20 reports of criminal damage. There has been a threefold increase in reporting in the second half of that period since 2016, compared with the first part. I would have thought that was of great interest to many people, and particularly to Members.

Those details were obtained under the auspices of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and are just one topical example of the importance of that Act, which was one of the great successes of the last Labour Government. It is used by individuals, campaign groups, journalists and Members to obtain information that the Government and public authorities have been unwilling to disclose voluntarily. In a 2012 report, the Justice Committee described it as “a significant enhancement of our democracy.”

In a Supreme Court judgment of the same year, Lord Mance said the Act “reflects the value to be attached to transparency and openness in the workings of public authorities in modern society”, while Lord Phillips said it “adds to parliamentary scrutiny a further and more direct route to a measure of public accountability”.

It is therefore sad that some former exponents of the Act have in the past 20 years sought to limit its scope, usually on one of two grounds. The first is on policy grounds, saying that they believe the Act restricts the ability of the Government to debate freely, because sensitive matters might be disclosed, which is at least honest. Secondly, and more commonly, it is on resource grounds by trying to restrict the amount of money spent by public authorities on responding to inquiries, which is ostensibly to save public money but is really to restrict the right of the public and others to freedom of information.

I am afraid that that still goes on. The excellent Campaign for Freedom of Information published a report only this week on the variation between London councils’ response times to freedom of information inquiries. I will not go there, because that is not the topic of the debate, but that report bears a lot of scrutiny, as all its reports do. Interestingly, the establishment of the Independent Commission on Freedom of Information, chaired by Lord Burns, by the coalition Government was widely believed to be paving the way for new restrictions; I believed that it was. However, having looked at the merits of freedom of information, it ended up recommending the opposite. Its 2016 report found that freedom of information had “enhanced openness and transparency”, and called for the right of access to be strengthened, not restricted.

Indeed, one of that commission’s recommendations for strengthening the Act was to address the problem of obtaining information from contractors, which would also be addressed by my private Member’s Bill, the Freedom of Information (Extension) Bill, which is still before the House but is rapidly running out of time.

However good the legislation, in the 20 years since its passage, as it will be next year, we have fallen behind other countries and some of the limitations of the Act have been exhibited, which we probably now need to correct. I hope to hear from the Minister that we will attend to that. I am sure that my friend, the hon. Member for Edinburgh East, will tell us that things are done better in Scotland, but they are also done better in Brazil, Estonia, Macedonia, New Zealand, South Africa, Ireland and Hungary, some of which have incorporated some of the measures I propose. That is a rather eclectic group of countries.

It is right that there have been some changes to the Act, but they have been limited; a certain number of bodies that were perhaps in a grey area are now subject to the Act. The only ones that have been added since the Act’s passage are—I think this is an exhaustive list—the Financial Reporting Council, the Association of Chief Police Officers, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, the Financial Ombudsman Service, Network Rail and, most recently, the National Police Chiefs’ Council. It is inarguable that any of those bodies should have been within the ambit of the Act, but it took two years to designate the NPCC in that way. I will come on to this in more detail in a moment, but there are essentially two ways to expand the ambit of the Act: by adding bodies to the schedule or by incorporating different types of bodies, such as contractors, under the powers granted by section 5 of the Act. No use of those powers has been made at all, so far as I can see.

An enormous range of public services are now delivered by private companies, charities or not-for-profit agencies under contracts with public authorities, ranging from the running of prisons and immigration removal centres to the provision of meals on wheels, social care visits and parking services. The Information Commissioner estimated recently that more than £284 billion—a third of all Government spending—goes on the purchasing of public services. Some of the main recipients of that spending have become household names; some are perhaps better known than certain Government Departments, including Serco, G4S, Capita and the now infamous Carillion. Unfortunately, under FOI, those contractors are significantly less accountable to the public than the authorities that previously delivered the services directly.

Here the story becomes a little more complicated. The Freedom of Information Act applies not only to information held by a public authority, but to information held by someone else on an authority’s behalf. But when is information held on an authority’s behalf? The test
applied by the Information Commissioner and, on appeal, the information rights tribunal, whether the contract
between the authority and the contractor empowers the
authority to demand that information from the contractor.
If it does, that information is considered to be held on
the authority’s behalf, and is available, via an FOI
request, to the authority. If it does not, the information
is considered to be held for the contractor’s own purposes
and is not subject to FOI.

The FOI requests that have been refused because the contract gave the authority no right to the information
form a long list. That list includes a request for information
on fire safety defects in the CT scanner room of a
hospital that the NHS trust leased under a private
finance initiative contract that did not give it the right
to such information from the PFI body. When the
request was made, the trust could not obtain the
information, so neither could the requester. The list also
includes a request for information on the number of
complaints made against court security staff, and the
number of those staff with criminal convictions. The
staff were employed by G4S, and the Ministry of Justice’s
contract did not entitle it to such information.

There was also a request for information on the number of prison staff at the privately run HMP
Birmingham, and the number of attacks at the prison.
Again, that information was held only by G4S and was
not covered by the MOJ’s contract. A request for
information on the value of penalty fares issued by
London Overground and docklands light railway was
also refused, as the information was held by private
sector inspectors, as was a request on the cost of bringing
TV licensing prosecutions, because the information was
held by Capita and was not even known to the BBC.

I will add two examples that are close to home. Last
Friday, I attended a demonstration outside Hammersmith
Hospital in my constituency by porterage, cleaning and
catering staff, who are on very poor terms and conditions
and, in many cases, the minimum wage. They are all
employed by Sodexo—another large multinational
company—and I heard horrific stories of the conditions
that people had to work under and what happened
when people were sick. If they had been directly employed,
I could have made inquiries to find out the truth of the
matter about at least some of those terms and conditions,
but I know there is no possibility of that. I could try to
talk to Sodexo if it would talk to me; I could try to talk
to the trust about the contract, but I would like to be
able to get access to information of that kind. I have
only praise for the workers, who provide an essential
public service, and for the GMB union, which is representing
them in the dispute. It is difficult to do that when one
hand is tied behind your back.

The other example is from the neighbouring constituency
of Kensington and relates to a tragedy with which we
will all be very familiar—the Grenfell Tower fire. For
some time, the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant
Management Organisation, which managed Grenfell
Tower, refused FOI requests on the grounds that it was
not itself a public authority. The Information Commissioner
upheld such a refusal in 2012.

KCTMO latterly accepted that it held information on
behalf of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea
and began to reply to requests, but in July 2017, after
the fire, it refused another request, again on the grounds
that it was not subject to the Act. That was in relation
to a 2005 consultant’s report documenting the failure
by KCTMO and one of its contractors to maintain
the Grenfell Tower emergency lighting system. The
extraordinary risk of allowing such information to be
withheld from the public is obvious. We need to remove
the uncertainty that led to that thoroughly unsatisfactory
and dangerous situation.

It is common to find contracts containing some
impressive-sounding clause such as: “The contractor
undertakes to assist the authority in complying with its
obligations under the Freedom of Information Act.”
That sounds fine until we realise that the authority’s
obligations are to deal with FOI requests for information
that the contractor holds on its behalf. What information
is held on the contractor’s behalf? Such clauses take us
no further in establishing that.

One answer is to introduce into contracts an umbrella
clause saying that all information relating to the
performance or planned performance of the contract is
held on the authority’s behalf for FOI purposes. All
such information will then be accessible under the FOI
Act or under the Environmental Information Regulations
2004 via a request to the authority. That is what my
private Member’s Bill would do. The Freedom of
Information (Extension) Bill would insert into the FOI
Act a new section 3A stipulating that all contracts
entered into by public authorities for the provision of
services are deemed to include such a disclosure clause.
The clause would also apply to the contractor’s subcontracts.
It would cover existing as well as future contracts.

The result would be that all information about the
planned or actual performance of the contract would be
subject to the FOI Act or, in the case of environmental
information, to the parallel EIR. That does not mean
that all such information would automatically be released.
Disclosure would depend on whether exemptions applied—
for example, for information whose disclosure would be
harmful to the contractor’s or the authority’s commercial
interests, or be a breach of confidence. I stress that the
measure is not intended to guarantee disclosure of
contractors’ information. Its aim is to ensure that the
FOI process applies, so that information is disclosed
unless there is good reason not to disclose. The advantage
of that approach is that it would not require contractors
and, in particular, small bodies with few staff to spend
time learning how to deal with FOI requests. The
request would be answered by the public authority.

The Freedom of Information Act itself contains a
separate, but so far never used, mechanism for bringing
contractors directly within its scope. Under section
5(l)(b), contractors can be designated as public authorities
in their own right for FOI purposes and required to deal
directly with requests. The procedure can be used only
where the contract is for a service that it is the authority’s
function to provide, which is not the case for all contracts.
The Scottish Government have brought contractors
that run prisons and their subcontractors under the
Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 via such a
mechanism. I regret that that has not been done under
the UK Act as well.

There is substantial support for action to deal with
contractors. In 2012, the Public Accounts Committee
said that

“where private companies provide public services funded by the
taxpayer, those areas of their business which are publicly funded
should be subject to the Freedom of Information Act provision.”
In 2018, the Committee on Standards in Public Life urged the Government to consult on extension of the FOI Act to cover information held by public service contractors. The Burns commission, which I have mentioned, recommended, in relation to larger contractors, that

“information concerning the performance or delivery of public services under contract should be treated as being held on behalf of the contracting public authority. This would make such information available to requestors who make requests to the contracting public authority.”

Most importantly, this January the Information Commissioner, Elizabeth Denham, published her report entitled “Outsourcing Oversight? The case for reforming access to information law”, which calls for changes in the FOI Act similar to those proposed in my Bill. It is not the first time that the commissioner has indicated that that is what she wishes to see, but this weighty and authoritative report makes the case far more stringently than I can, with the resources available to me.

The report calls for, as one option, greater use of existing powers under section 5 of the FOI Act. It recommends—this is what I was explaining earlier—that the Government should:

“Designate contractors regarding the public functions they undertake where this would be in the public interest”. It also recommends that they:

“Designate a greater number of other organisations exercising functions of a public nature, and do so more frequently and efficiently.”

The report states:

“Designation orders under section 5...would give the public the right to make requests directly to these organisations and require them to proactively disclose information in line with a publication scheme.”

The alternative would be to amend the primary legislation. Given the 20-year gap, that might be a more sensible course. It would allow for amendment of the environmental regulations as well.

The Government often plead lack of time for this, but given that there are at least three routes to reach the same objective, as I have explained, one of those must suit the Government’s purposes. As I have said, there has been no attempt at all to bring private contractors within the remit of the Act so far. There have been some additions—I read out the list earlier—to the schedule of bodies that are subject to the Act, but that has been, if not grudging, rather nugatory in its effect. Some of the leading contenders are not yet on the list, and perhaps the leading contender—this is the second part of the debate today—is housing associations.

Housing associations are not covered by freedom of information, although many of them have inherited local authority housing stock. This will be a matter close to your own heart, Mr Betts, given that you chair the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. In some cases, the tenants, and therefore the public, have lost freedom of information rights that they previously enjoyed when those homes were under council control. I have examples of such estates in my constituency. The Grenfell fire has highlighted what I would say is the irresistible need for a right of access if only on safety grounds, yet when Inside Housing asked 61 housing associations for copies of their fire risk assessments in 2017, only seven provided them.

Let me give just a few more examples. A housing association tenant who asked for information about the cause of a fire in his premises in 2009 received no answer. A tenant who asked whether the water supply to his premises was provided through potentially toxic lead pipes received no answer. A tenant was refused a copy of an electricity bill, which led to his being charged £1,200 to cover the cost of six communal light bulbs. Another unsuccessfully asked for the make and model of estate street lighting that he found “overpowering” at night. He wanted the information in order to contact the manufacturer to see whether it could suggest a remedy, but he was refused. Requests for the number of repossession orders served since the bedroom tax came into force and the number of those tenants who had no arrears before that date were also refused.

Those are hardly state secrets; they would be available to any council tenant. It seems entirely anomalous and illogical that they are not available to other social landlords’ tenants as well. In 2011, the coalition Government announced that they would consult housing associations on bringing them under freedom of information. Regrettably, they failed to consult or act, and the current Government show no sign of doing so either.

I will refer briefly to the National Housing Federation. I ought not to have a go at the National Housing Federation, because it generally does a good job in representing its members. However, its arguments for not coming under the Freedom of Information Act, which it barely puts forward in its briefing, are thin. I think it knows in its heart of hearts that it should just give in gracefully, which actually would be to its advantage. The NHF’s arguments, whether commercial confidentiality, the ability to purchase land or the idea that housing associations might need to be reclassified as public bodies, are chimeras and fabulous tales. I believe that the legislation has been passed in Scotland and housing associations there will come under the equivalent Act later this year. There seems to have been no problem there.

As for commercial confidentiality, there are exemptions in the Act, which are there to be used. All institutions, including universities, have used the excuse of financial burden. Any public body or a quasi-public body of this kind will have expenses. It will have to do consultations, run democratic organisations and be subject to more regulations on the whole than individual private citizens. That is just a fact of life, and freedom of information is another fact of life along those same lines. There is no barrier to charities—universities are a good example—coming under the Freedom of Information Act. There is no reason why they will be reclassified as public bodies simply by coming under the Freedom of Information Act. I cannot even say “good try” to the NHF on this occasion. It cannot actually bring itself in the document to say what it wants us to do. It just leaves it there. I think another push might take it on to the side of the angels on this one, but we will see.

For completeness, in the Information Commissioner’s report and in my Bill there are some other anomalies that we ask the Government to address as a matter of simple logic. One such anomaly is electoral registration officers and returning officers. At one stage the Government agreed with us on that, so why it has not been done is a mystery. Local safeguarding children boards are another anomaly. They are not the subject of this debate and
therefore I will not say a great deal more about them. However, it is an indication that, rather than being entirely resistant, having to be pushed every time and taking their time over it, it would be nice if the Government had a proper review and decided what would bring the Freedom of Information Act up to date in some of the ways that have been indicated.

To conclude, I believe that a consensus is growing. The Information Commissioner is doing an excellent job not only of clearing the backlog of complaints and administering the scheme, which was the primary function, but of championing the cause of freedom of information. Equally, Maurice Frankel and the Campaign for Freedom of Information, which was instrumental all those years ago in getting the Freedom of Information Act passed, are constantly scrutinising and pushing it in an exemplary way. I thank them in particular for their assistance with my Bill and with this debate.

There have been previous attempts at legislation. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), the shadow Policing Minister, is ably ploughing the same furrow. There is even some support from the Government Benches. The hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), after talking out my Bill, assured me that was nothing personal; he was actually talking out another Bill at the time, and he commended my Bill and said he would fully support it next time there is an opportunity. What more rousing recommendation does one need than that? Not only my party, but the Scottish National party, the Liberal Democrats and the Green party support this measure. The Minister might begin to cotton on to the fact that she is in a small minority here, constantly being pushed in the right direction.

I will end by putting the following questions to the Minister. Given the situation that I have outlined—in respect of contractors and the work that they do, and in respect of housing associations and other organisations—is exactly analogous to those public sector bodies that are fully subject to the Freedom of Information Act, so that there could be two institutions next to each other operating under completely separate regimes, this is not really a question of the Government making concessions, but simply a case of the Government correcting anomalies. Whether they do that through secondary legislation, by supporting my Bill or through primary legislation, the time has come for it to happen.

I hope the Minister is grateful for this opportunity to indicate where the Government’s thinking is on this matter, in respect of the individual examples that I have given and in respect of reviewing the Freedom of Information Act generally. I hope that there will be enough time for her to reply in detail.

2.56 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Betts. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) on securing the debate and making an extraordinarily persuasive case, as he always does. It was so persuasive that, were the Minister not constrained by her place on the Government Front Bench, I am sure she would agree with it entirely.

This is not a new issue. I should declare at the outset that when I worked for the public services union Unison before coming to this place, it was already a matter of great concern to us. We could see the way the world was changing and the potential pitfalls that lay ahead. We were delighted that through our work with the Labour party, via our Labour link, we were able to secure a commitment from the then shadow Front Bench that freedom of information would indeed be extended to all public service providers.

The coalition Government at the time did not agree with that and sadly—2015 did not see the return of a Labour Government—this woefully out-of-date position persists. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith said, the Information Commissioner agrees. In the weighty report—we have all been carrying it around—entitled “Outsourcing Oversight? The case for reforming access to information law”, the commissioner makes a compelling case. The argument is essentially that the Freedom of Information Act should be extended to all public services, even when they are carried out by private companies.

I will say a bit more about the report and give some examples of where this creates problems in my constituency—I suspect that similar cases would be found across the country. The Information Commissioner recently came to Parliament to launch her report at an event, which I was very pleased to be on the panel for, organised by the parliamentary internet, communications and technology forum. Her team has done an excellent job of highlighting the problem, which is central to the issues that my hon. Friend has pointed out.

The key point is to understand how different the world now is from the world of the late 1990s, when the Freedom of Information Act was first introduced. Government now spend almost a third of our total expenditure with external suppliers—some £284 billion a year, which is an extraordinary amount of money. These external suppliers deliver services on behalf of public authorities. They are often private companies, charities and other not-for-profit organisations, which are not necessarily subject to freedom of information, thus massively diminishing the accountability of public service delivery.

As we have heard, the Information Commissioner uses the examples of the Grenfell Tower tragedy and the collapse of Carillion to show the consequences of a lack of transparency and accountability. They are both particularly awful examples. I have raised that concern with Ministers before. The answer was that extending the Freedom of Information Act would have made little difference, but I disagree. I think there is an essential problem with delivering public services in an opaque manner.

When councils run services, if we think they are doing a bad job, there is a simple solution: we vote them out—we get rid of them. That concentrates minds. Sadly, however good the service delivery may be through housing associations or public service contractors, or local charities providing social services and so on, when questions are asked it is much harder to know what to do about them. Extending the Freedom of Information Act hands that power of exposure and transparency back to citizens, and that ultimately is how to drive up standards. It reduces the risk of narrow or neglectful practices in the delivery of those services.
As constituency MPs—I am sure colleagues have the same experience—residents write to us about all manner of issues, some of which we have more control over resolving than others. In Cambridge, where the cost of living is extremely high, housing makes up a significant part of my postbag. For example, Montreal Square is a small area of housing—a delightful oasis of calm in the busy Romsey part of the city. Cambridge Housing Society, a local housing association, proposed to replace the 18 existing homes with 45 new, affordable, energy-efficient homes. Understandably perhaps, it wants to modernise existing homes on the site, and add more. Equally understandably, some of the residents who live there—some have been there for more than 35 years—are very unhappy about that fundamental change to their local community.

I pay tribute to Cambridge Housing Society and its chief executive, Nigel Howlett. It is an excellent organisation doing a great job, and Nigel is an outstanding leader in the sector. It is a charity that aims to provide the maximum amount of housing possible, but it also wants to take into account the concerns of the local community, so it is in a difficult position. It is trying to balance the needs of existing tenants against potential future tenants who do not have homes at the moment. That is a hard choice, but essentially it is a political one and, in my view, it should be taken by people who are democratically accountable. People come to me and ask, “Who makes the decision? What can be done about it?” If it was a council decision, the answer would be very clear.

Extending freedom of information to housing associations would not automatically solve the problem, but it would be a significant step forward. It would allow far greater accountability for residents and members of the wider community. It would give them a much stronger lever to question how decisions are being made and, most crucially, to get the information behind the decisions. I know that the Minister will say, “We are putting out more and more data.” It is not more data we want; it is the key data that they do not want to share that we want. That is what freedom of information legislation gets to.

My hon. Friend already referred to the National Housing Federation’s briefing. I am delighted to say that there has been no collusion, but my reaction was exactly the same—my office colleague will testify to my reaction. The briefing states that extending freedom of information legislation could put

“not-for-profit providers at a disadvantage against commercial bodies in bidding for land...reducing housing associations’ ability to obtain private investment.”

As my hon. Friend so eloquently put it, those are fairly woeful excuses. The Information Commissioner has assured me that the Freedom of Information Act already has mechanisms in place to deal with such issues. It is a flimsy set of arguments, frankly. I certainly want to find ways of helping housing associations in their battle against developers for land, but diminishing public accountability is the wrong way to go about it. It would be much better to address the very real problem of secrecy in the commercial land market. It should not be forgotten, of course, that huge amounts of public money goes through housing associations, and has done so in the past, to provide essential homes for people. We must protect the democratic accountability of our public services.

I have two further examples in other sectors, which show how freedom of information can make a difference. Across the country, and in Cambridge and Cambridgeshire, we have seen mass academatisation of schools, which is often unpopular. Parents, children and local communities feel very strongly about this issue. In my city there is currently a proposal for a merger of a local multi-academy trust with a large national one, which has caused some upset among my constituents, who are concerned—rightly, in my view—about the potential consequences.

Both academies and multi-academy trusts are subject to FOI, but the position is far from clear. Academies were brought under the FOI Act in 2010 and have to answer FOI requests. With multi-academy trusts, the situation is a little more complex. I sought advice from the Information Commissioner’s Office, which told me:

“MATs will be covered by the FOI Act (and are ultimately responsible for the FOI obligations of all the academies)”,

but

“the information requested must be held ‘for the purposes of the proprietor’s functions under Academy arrangements’. It’s very likely that the information held will fall into the purposes specified”.

However, it is not hard to imagine that if a multi-academy trust wanted to, it could use the FOI exemption for information that is a trade secret or

“would be likely to prejudice the commercial interests of any person or body”

in some of those cases. Where questions have been asked locally regarding the merging of academy trusts, I have been assured by the MAT in question that it is releasing as much information as it is permitted to through the current FOI regime. I commend them for that, but it is easy to see that less scrupulous trusts may not always choose that course of action.

This is not simply about the facts of legislation; it is also about how it feels to the public, and the need for communities to feel that they have genuine ownership over the services that their taxes fund. After all, whose schools are they? I think they are our schools, but all too often it does not really feel like that. Extending the Freedom of Information Act in the way suggested might help a little, although I would argue that a much more substantial overhaul is needed.

This is not my first foray into arguing with the Cabinet Office about extending the Freedom of Information Act. I have an excellent exam board in my constituency, Cambridge Assessment, which is a major local employer. As Cambridge Assessment is a department of the University of Cambridge, it is subject to freedom of information requests. Other exam boards are not. That issue was first raised with me, astonishingly, as long ago as 2010, at a public hustings event hosted by Cambridge Assessment and chaired by the estimable Simon Lebus, then chief executive. He challenged each candidate to declare whether they would pursue the issue and help him resolve it before his retirement, which at that point he thought was still some way off. As happens at public hustings events, we all pledged to pursue it. Little did we know that it would be quicker to build the fantastic new buildings that those visiting Cambridge see on the railway line—a huge set of buildings—than to get the Cabinet Office to move on this question. The skewed playing field for exam boards does a major disservice to Cambridge Assessment, because it is treated differently from its
competitors. It argues that the Act should be extended to all exam boards because they use public money to perform a public service.

The Minister has been good enough to sit down with me and her officials on a number of occasions on this issue, a while ago. The letter I received from her this week was profoundly disappointing. She told me that she had had discussions with the relevant Education Minister, with the conclusion that although “the Ministry of State agreed in principle that there are other awarding organisations that carry out functions of a public nature”,

because “the Department for Education has undertaken significant reforms of A Levels and GCSEs, which has placed significant additional burdens on awarding organisations, the Government is currently not in a position to being another process of consultation and possible legislative change”.

That is a dreadful argument, even by this Government’s miserable standards—I am cross about this. They have made some woefully unpopular and regressive education policy changes, and they are using that as an excuse for not being prepared to make some that might actually improve the accountability and transparency of the way we educate our young people.

Andy Slaughter: My hon. Friend has a long track record of campaigning on FOI—far longer than mine—and I am grateful that he is here for the debate. Does he agree that the decision to move freedom of information to the Cabinet Office—I do not mean this to reflect on the current Minister—was a mistake? It has been put in with data protection, which is often about restricting access to information, for the right reasons. In the Ministry of Justice, and with the Justice Committee, there was a far more robust approach to calling out the Government’s questions. A reassignment of Department and Committee might be a suitable step.

Daniel Zeichner: My hon. Friend is far more of an expert than I am on the matter. He has made an interesting observation that might be worth pursuing further. He may well have a very strong point there.

To return to my quest that is now nine years on. In fact, it is probably more than nine years, because I know that my predecessors, Julian Huppert and David Howarth, pursued the matter. I fear it might go back as far as Anne Campbell’s time. As I have said, I made a pledge to Simon Lebus that we would try to resolve the issue before his retirement. Sadly, it has not been achieved. I fear it might have to wait for a Labour Government, which I am sure will be along soon.

Freedom of information is sometimes considered a slightly nerdy issue—no apologies to colleagues present—but it is an incredibly important mechanism to secure proper accountability and democratic oversight. It is disappointing that we have not yet had a proper Government response to the Information Commissioner’s report, although, to be fair to the Minister, she has said that they are considering it carefully and will respond in due course, which of course is wonderful civil service speak. We will await events. We cannot let private companies get away with always doing their dealings out of the public eye when their decisions have a serious impact on the lives of all our constituents. We need the tools to provide the checks and balances. Too often it seems to be a carry-on behind closed doors and it cannot continue.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): We will now move on to the Front-Bench speakers. The first is the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), who will be pleased to know that it is not the Chair’s responsibility to sing him happy birthday.

3.11 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Betts. I can think of no finer way to celebrate my 60th birthday than to be here arguing for an extension of the rights of people to information from the companies that do things for them or sometimes to them. I had hoped the debate would be a little better attended; we are somewhat thin on the ground. I assume that that is not to do with the importance that colleagues attach to the topic, but more to do with the bizarre timetabling of this week in Westminster where we have a faux tranquillity—the calm before next week’s storm—because there is not much going on in terms of debates and votes. Perhaps that has led colleagues to make a beeline for their constituencies to do important work there, rather than being available to participate in this discussion.

We will have to make up for absent colleagues, but that does not undermine the importance of this subject.

My purpose here today on behalf of the third party is to support the arguments of the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) and to advocate for a change in the law. Also, I will try to use this brief presentation to suggest some of the things that have already happened in Scotland, from which colleagues here might be able to learn.

Before I go into that, I want to put on the record a first-principles argument as to why freedom of information is important, because sometimes that gets lost in debate when it becomes technical and legalistic.

The greatest advocates for freedom of information are journalists—the press. That is correct because it is impossible to have a free press without the people who look at and scrutinise public institutions having the right and the ability to gain information about what the institutions are doing. If barriers are put up against that process, we diminish the role of a free press and undermine one of the pillars of our democratic system.

Freedom of information is also important for campaign groups that seek a change in how things are organised in our society. For me, the most fundamental importance of freedom of information relates to the individual: it gives the individual citizen, who is often the client, the consumer and the user of what is provided by corporations and companies, the right to understand what is being done to them or for them. It is very much about the contract between governors and the governed and making sure we live in a democratic society. Information flow and the ability to get it are absolutely central to that.

There has been debate about who should be covered by freedom of information legislation. The purpose is to try to look at organisations or institutions that operate in the public interest or at the behest of the public. They provide a public service. Even before the complexities of today’s modern governmental apparatus,
it was the case for decades and for generations that the purpose of Governments was not always just directly to provide things. Often, the purpose of Government was to regulate or mandate other independent organisations to provide things. So, if we do not cover those organisations that are directed by public bodies, as well as the public bodies themselves, we get only half the picture.

In this world in which we live, where over the past 10 to 20 years we have seen an awful lot of debate about whether a public service should be provided directly or put out to the private sector to provide on behalf of the public, as that debate has got more and more complex so our legislation and its reach need to become more complex. If the privatisation of a service can be used to deny people the right to information on how it is run, that is a process where one Government policy—privatisation—leads to the undermining of another, freedom of information. So it is right that we review that situation.

In Scotland, the situation has been different. The UK passed the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and two years later the fledgling Scottish Parliament passed the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002, which had many of the same provisions and many of the same abilities in terms of the Parliament being able to extend the reach of the legislation. Of course, the Scottish legislation applies only to Scottish organisations. Organisations that operate in Scotland but are headquartered here are covered by the UK legislation, which is another reason it is in our interest to share information and let colleagues benefit from the experience that the Scottish Government have in this area, and a reason it is important for us to try to see the legislation here at Westminster improve—because Scotland is still, for the time being, part of the UK, and we therefore wish to benefit from any improvements that might be made at UK level.

The Information Commissioner, Elizabeth Denham, is fairly clear—scathingly so in many ways—about the fact that the current legislation is not fit for purpose. She also comments the experience in Scotland. I will quote from her recent speech. The hon. Member for Hammersmith compared us to other countries, and she said:

"Closer to home, the Scottish law provides greater coverage than our own."

On page 7 of the report, she states that

"we are falling behind our counterparts in Scotland... who have done more to expand the reach of information access".

In Scotland, we have already extended the scope of freedom of information provision to a range of bodies operating on behalf of the public sector—for example, private prisons, private contractors providing public services, and some private contractors or organisations that provide an important component within the matrix of social services where services are provided by a number of different providers. I think, for example, of independent special schools, which provide a vital service and to which the reach of the law now applies.

In Scotland, we have spent much of the past year debating the proposal that is in front of us today: to extend freedom of information legislation to registered social landlords, principally to housing associations. I recommend that colleagues look at not only what happens, but the process by which we got there and by which the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament got there. An 11-month consultation took place throughout 2018, a lot of it with the housing associations—either individually or collectively—that were going to be affected by it. A lot of complex aspects of this debate came to light, but the important thing is that they came to light, were considered and were resolved. They were not barriers to moving forward. I hope the Minister will take it upon herself to be the champion of navigating this process and these reforms, rather than seeing what are perceived as difficulties or anomalies, or things that need to be exempt, and regarding those as a reason for inaction.

I will give a couple of examples from the consultation. There are specific requirements in the Scottish housing legislation—and, I think, in the equivalent English legislation—on providing accommodation for particular groups. Gypsies and Travellers are mentioned, for example. Some housing associations did not think it was right for freedom of information to apply in that case, because what they did would be specific to the client group, not a matter of general public interest. The matter was debated and the Scottish Government came to the conclusion that it probably was in the general public interest for anyone to have the opportunity to know what was happening with regard to Gypsies and Travellers, because the consequences if something went wrong, or if the action in question was not taken, would be borne not just by Gypsies and Travellers but by the wider community. The Scottish Government identified and defined a wider community interest, which meant that the area in question should be included.

Housing associations in Scotland spend a lot of time not only directly managing housing, but providing services to other landlords—sometimes in the private sector—through the process of factoring, which might include cleansing or environmental services. The housing associations argued quite strongly that factoring for third parties should be excluded from the legislation because it was a private contractual matter between them and a third-party organisation; it was not a matter of the public interest. After a long period of debate, which is written up in the report that was published two weeks ago, the Scottish Government came to the conclusion that they were minded to agree in this instance with the housing associations that factoring was a specific additional service that need not come within the scope of the legislation.

Finally, some housing associations argued that the scope of the information should be limited to what they were directly providing, by way of a contracted or legislated public service, and that people should not be able to ask questions or get information about the financial or constitutional governance of the organisation. They argued quite strongly to put blinkers on the legislation so that it would be possible to look only in certain areas. Again, after a long process of debate and consultation, that argument was rejected and it was felt that the public have a right to know about the general financial governance of housing associations because that is so critical to their ability to do the job that the public expect them to do.

The report process has concluded in Scotland, and many concerns were not only listened to but taken on board. Some were agreed and some rejected. The Government are now in a position to go forward with genuine broad consent and do exactly what the hon.
Member for Hammersmith proposes should happen in England—extend the scope of freedom of information legislation to registered social landlords and housing associations. That will happen in Scotland in November, and I hope that when it does it provides further information and assistance to colleagues here, in ensuring that the rest of the United Kingdom does not lag behind and that where Scotland has pioneered, the rest of the UK will catch up.

3.22 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts, and to follow the birthday boy, the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard)—I wish him the best on his special day, and many more of them to come.

The debate, obtained by my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), follows on from his work on his private Member’s Bill, the Freedom of Information (Extension) Bill, as well as from work done by my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner). It also follows the report from the Information Commissioner’s Office, which has been referred to. This is clearly not a case of the Information Commissioner making a power grab, or of mission creep. The report is based on evidence showing where the current situation is not working, or where the ICO does not have sufficient power to challenge bodies that undertake work on behalf of public authorities, such that the balance needs to be redressed. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith for his persistence on the matter, but I cannot help thinking that at some point the change he proposes will become inevitable.

I, too, received a briefing from the National Housing Federation, and I gave it a read. I confess that my response was similar to that of my hon. Friend: “Is that it?” The reasons given for not adopting the proposals seemed pretty thin. I wondered why such bodies might not want the change. Perhaps it is because of concern about a regulatory workload and burden. However, it is clear to me that, where freedom of information operates, there is a possibility of change in the culture of the organisations operating under its auspices. They realise that they can no longer hold on tightly to information or act in a secretive manner, and so they become more open to the people whom they exist to serve. Their manner of doing business, internally and externally, therefore becomes more open, and perhaps they become better and more efficient organisations as a result. That culture change should be embraced and welcomed.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith discussed occasions when freedom of information requests were denied, such as requests regarding the number of attacks at HM Prison Birmingham, and the number of prison staff there—figures that G4S declined to provide. G4S also declined to provide information on the number of complaints from the public against court security officers. My hon. Friend discussed television licences and Virgin Care providing NHS services—something that has recently happened in my area, where increasingly community health services are delivered by private sector contractors. That has been a deliberate policy of the Government, and we have a philosophical difference about that privatisation. However, as the hon. Member for Edinburgh East said, the law must be able to keep up with changes in the way society is structured.

I noted something that my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge said about public money being used for public services. That is at the core of the issue, and there cannot be any real argument about it. Where public money is being used to provide a public service, there should be no hiding place, and neither should there be any desire to hide from the necessary and, I think, welcome scrutiny that freedom of information provides.

Under the current Conservative Government there has been a clear trend in favour of large outsourcing companies, which tend to operate with little accountability or public responsibility. Carillion, Interserve, Capita and G4S are names that we regularly see. The reach of those companies is huge. I think I am correct in saying that Interserve had construction contracts to build motorway junctions, and it was running the probation service. Those companies’ reach goes right across society. The Opposition believe that the lack of responsibility and openness can amplify the possibility of problems. As the companies in question have less responsibility to act openly, they tend to clam up—for want of a better expression—hunker down and try to conceal any problems. We are clear that public services need to be transparent and accountable to the people who use them, regardless of whether they are delivered by the public sector or by private companies. We were clear about that in 2017, when our manifesto stated:

“We will extend the Freedom of Information Act to private companies that run public services”.

That will also be in our next general election manifesto, whenever it is required. We shall also extend the Freedom of Information Act to cover housing associations and other social landlords, as well as tenant management organisations, and we will consider extending it to cover contractor-held information.

The housing point is important because of the dreadful example discussed by my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith: the tragedy at Grenfell Tower. We shall never know whether openness might have prevented the tragedy. The public inquiry under way at the moment will consider those issues. We know, however, that residents were battling for several years beforehand to try to find information that was consistently denied to them—I will say no more, because the matter is currently under consideration by the inquiry.

The Freedom of Information Act does not generally apply to information held by contractors about the public service they provide to local and central Government—for example for social care, health, public transport, school inspections and privately run prisons—and that is because of a loophole in the system. Section 3(2) of the Act states that information held “by the public authority” also includes information “held by another person on behalf of an authority”.

The information that a contractor holds on behalf of a public authority is therefore within the scope of a freedom of information request, even if the authority never physically holds that information as its own hard copy or electronic file. However, that does not include all information that may be held by the contractor in connection with the performance or proposed performance of a contract.

[Tommy Sheppard]
Tenants and the public have the right to information about councils under the Freedom of Information Act, but not about housing associations, which provide the same essential housing services and receive significant public investment. In my area almost all public housing is provided by three or four housing associations, and they were stock transfers previously owned by Chester City Council. The previous Labour Government and the Conservative-led coalition proposed that the legislation should cover housing associations, but that has not yet been achieved. Obtaining information from contractors, including on fire safety, can prevent a problem, and my hon. Friend’s Bill seeks to correct that serious omission by making housing associations public authorities for the purposes of the Freedom of Information Act.

Public authorities are suffering from the difficulties of austerity and cuts, and they will find it onerous to provide responses to freedom of information requests. However, the 2000 Act does contain provisions to prevent mischiefful or repetitive requests from the same residents. Perhaps that has given public contractors a sense that they do not want to take on the same burdens, but if they are happy to take on public contracts they should surely be happy to take on the responsibilities of being a public contractor.

We have seen in the Government’s approach to public contracting what I believe to be a form of reverse redistribution that takes large amounts of public money and puts it into the pockets of big public contractors. From there it goes into the pockets, bank accounts, or indeed—dare I perhaps inject an unwelcome political element into the debate?—the offshore bank accounts, that belong to some of the owners of those public bodies.

Listening to the contributions from my hon. Friends, it seems that when public money is being spent on delivering public services, there can be no reason why the same public scrutiny should not be applied. It is a matter of time. Let us hope that it is only a matter of minutes, while the Minister responds, but if it does take longer to introduce such a measure, that will be achieved when the next Labour Government take office.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I call the Minister. I hope that she will allow a couple of minutes at the end for the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) to wind up the debate.

3.37 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts, and I thank you for that reminder. I thank the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) for his points. I know that his thoughtful presentation follows on from the work on his private Member’s Bill. I also thank the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner). As he noted, we have looked in some detail at an issue regarding one particular examination board, but if he will forgive me, this afternoon I will focus on responding to the more general points that have been raised.

Freedom of information is, of course, one of the pillars on which open government operates. The Government are committed to supporting the effective operation of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.
That Act has been in operation for more than 10 years. It received post-legislative scrutiny by the Justice Committee in 2012, and it was reviewed by the Independent Commission on Freedom of Information in 2016. One of the key questions raised by the hon. Member for Hammersmith is whether the time is right for an overall review of the Act, and I point him towards that work from 2016. It considered whether the Act still ensures an appropriate balance between transparency and the need for a private space—for example for advice and discussion—as well as whether the costs of freedom of information are proportionate to its many benefits.

The Government welcomed the commission’s focus on enhancing transparency, which went a little wider than just the 2000 Act. The Information Commissioner’s Office has added an important piece of research to the scrutiny of that Act with its recent report, and I am grateful to the commission and the commissioner for their work on a significant and complex matter. I will respond to that report shortly—I am sure hon. Members look forward to having that response on their bedside tables, just as they did the report itself.

As the Information Commissioner identified in her report, since the passage of the Freedom of Information Act, the UK has been at the forefront of opening up data to allow the public and press to hold public bodies to account. The Government are among the most open and transparent in the world and remain committed to the principles of transparency and openness. We launched updated transparency principles in 2017 and it is a fact that we are publishing more data than ever. We will continue to support the effective operation of the Act as part of that.

On the question of how housing associations ought to be dealt with, we fully share the view that landlords, including housing associations, should be accountable and transparent in their dealings with tenants, and should be responsive to their needs. I am not necessarily persuaded, however, that the extension of FOI to housing associations is the sole best means of achieving that. As landlords, housing associations are private sector bodies that deliver a social benefit, rather than exercising “functions of a public nature” or providing public functions under contract on behalf of a public authority, as the Act says. It is important to maintain that distinction; I do not think the analogy is as simple as the second key question of the hon. Member for Hammersmith suggests.

If any Government were deemed to exercise too much control over private bodies, there would be a significant risk that they could be classified as public sector bodies. That would mean that, in this case, their private debt of about £70 billion would be added to the Government’s debt burden—the public’s debt burden. Housing associations would also be subject to public sector borrowing constraints, which would limit their ability to finance the development of new social and affordable homes. I note that housing associations deliver 93% of all new affordable homes, so it is not a small matter.

In terms of accountability, the vast majority of housing associations are voluntarily registered with the regulator of social housing and if they seek public funding, they must be registered and subject to that regime. That means that they have a duty to comply with the standards set by that regulator, including making information available to tenants about the running of the organisation. The key point is that last summer, the Government announced a review of social housing regulation that will look at how transparency and accountability for tenants can be further improved, including better access to landlord information.

As with every hon. Member, I add to the record my sympathy and personal anguish at the tragedy at Grenfell Tower. As the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) acknowledged, the inquiry is looking at some of the issues, including communications with residents, which specifically covers whether there was a formal system for recording concerns, what concerns were raised at the time or after the recent renovations, how and to whom any such concerns were expressed, and what was done in response.

Andy Slaughter: I gently say to the Minister that there are two weaknesses in her argument. First, disclosing information voluntarily, however laudable the aim or honestly done, is not the same as giving citizens the power to interrogate an organisation. Secondly, if the Minister is right—I think it was the policy of a previous Conservative Government to put the onus on housing associations, rather than councils, to deliver the lion’s share of social housing—and they are standing in the shoes of councils, there is all the more reason for them to be accountable in that way. If Scotland and other charities can do it, why does the Minister appear to envisage the risk of a housing association suddenly being classed as a public body, just because it is subject to FOI?

Chloe Smith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for those points and for the way he has put his arguments. I am simply saying that such issues should be considered through the review.

I am also grateful for the points added by the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), to whom I wish a happy birthday. I add two points in relation to the situation in Scotland. First, when I was looking to see the record that will develop there. As I understand it, the provisions have not yet come into force, so we will look at how effective they are in increasing transparency. Secondly, as the hon. Member for Edinburgh East mentioned, the Scottish Government laid the planning for the consultation on these matters in 2016 and began it in 2017, so it is not a short process. I would like to think that all hon. Members present recognise that the provisions of the 2000 Act mean that such things are not necessarily quick, simple or short. I will come on a little later to how the Act may be used to extend the scope, if desired.

On contractors—the other half of the case made by the hon. Member for Hammersmith—I remind hon. Members of the arguments made by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office last year about why we as a Government use outsourcing. I say “we”, but successive Governments have used it. I will use his arguments as context in response to the contextual points that have been made today. As the hon. Member for City of Chester said, we may have philosophical differences, but this is why one would look at outsourcing as a benefit to the public.

Chloe Smith: 431WH
The Minister for Housing and Urban Development

432WH

It received post-legislative scrutiny by the Justice Committee in 2012, and it was reviewed by the Independent Commission on Freedom of Information in 2016. One of the key questions raised by the hon. Member for Hammersmith is whether the time is right for an overall review of the Act, and I point him towards that work from 2016. It considered whether the Act still ensures an appropriate balance between transparency and the need for a private space—for example for advice and discussion—as well as whether the costs of freedom of information are proportionate to its many benefits.

The Government welcomed the commission’s focus on enhancing transparency, which went a little wider than just the 2000 Act. The Information Commissioner’s Office has added an important piece of research to the scrutiny of that Act with its recent report, and I am grateful to the commission and the commissioner for their work on a significant and complex matter. I will respond to that report shortly—I am sure hon. Members look forward to having that response on their bedside tables, just as they did the report itself.

As the Information Commissioner identified in her report, since the passage of the Freedom of Information Act, the UK has been at the forefront of opening up data to allow the public and press to hold public bodies to account. The Government are among the most open and transparent in the world and remain committed to the principles of transparency and openness. We launched updated transparency principles in 2017 and it is a fact that we are publishing more data than ever. We will continue to support the effective operation of the Act as part of that.

On the question of how housing associations ought to be dealt with, we fully share the view that landlords, including housing associations, should be accountable and transparent in their dealings with tenants, and should be responsive to their needs. I am not necessarily persuaded, however, that the extension of FOI to housing associations is the sole best means of achieving that. As landlords, housing associations are private sector bodies that deliver a social benefit, rather than exercising “functions of a public nature” or providing public functions under contract on behalf of a public authority, as the Act says. It is important to maintain that distinction; I do not think the analogy is as simple as the second key question of the hon. Member for Hammersmith suggests.

If any Government were deemed to exercise too much control over private bodies, there would be a significant risk that they could be classified as public sector bodies. That would mean that, in this case, their private debt of about £70 billion would be added to the Government’s debt burden—the public’s debt burden. Housing associations would also be subject to public sector borrowing constraints, which would limit their ability to finance the development of new social and affordable homes. I note that housing associations deliver 93% of all new affordable homes, so it is not a small matter.

In terms of accountability, the vast majority of housing associations are voluntarily registered with the regulator of social housing and if they seek public funding, they must be registered and subject to that regime. That means that they have a duty to comply with the standards set by that regulator, including making information available to tenants about the running of the organisation. The key point is that last summer, the Government announced a review of social housing regulation that will look at how transparency and accountability for tenants can be further improved, including better access to landlord information.

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As the Minister for the Cabinet Office said, “you can have both good and bad in both the private and the public sectors”, as we all know from what we get in our constituency mailbags every week. He continued to say that “what matters is that the service works for the people who use it in their everyday needs” and that it provides “value for money for the taxpayer.”

It is the case that “the private sector has a vital role to play in delivering public services.”

and the Government continue to support that position, as have successive Governments since at least the 1980s, as I said.

As my right hon. Friend said, outsourcing can deliver “economies of scale” that can mean greatly better value and lower costs for the taxpayer. It is also the case that “open and fair competition…encourages creativity and innovation” that simply would not otherwise come about. Again, that benefits the user of that public service. The private sector can also bring “a range of specialist skills, world-class expertise and deeper knowledge to bear on what can be complex issues.”

His argument is really that the Government “cannot do everything by itself”, and should not, because “It needs the…innovation that only a…marketplace of suppliers can provide.”

In another speech last year on the subject, my right hon. Friend made the argument that small businesses and the third sector have a great appetite for taking part in providing those public services, and for a good reason. In many ways, they are often “closest to our communities” and are “in the best…position to deliver social value” through those contracts. That is an important further argument to think about when we look at outsourcing.

Because the Government remain committed to supporting that position, we are sceptical about the introduction of additional reporting burdens on those small organisations. We think that it would weaken the resilience of the delivery for the taxpayer, reduce the value for money that the Government can deliver for the taxpayer, and affect the support that the Government can give indirectly to those jobs when we use such suppliers.

In respect of contractors, the Government have certainly considered how best to balance the competing interests of transparency and burdens. As I have said, we recognise the importance of transparency in how public money is spent, but we are concerned about a disproportionate burden, because we do not want to discourage smaller organisations from serving the public.

Andy Slaughter: I am listening to the Minister’s argument, but again, I thought I had dealt with that point in my speech. The majority of inquiries will be about the major contractors that take the lion’s share. I entirely take her point about small contractors, but my Bill would put the onus and the responsibility for the cost on the public authority to do that, so there is a way round it.

Chloe Smith: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that clarification, and before I finish today I will talk briefly about that relationship between a contractor and the supplier, which is relevant to the proposal.

I will make one further general observation about the position of contractors; actually, I think the hon. Gentleman made it himself in his remarks. Of course, the Act exempts all organisations from providing information in certain ways, for example on grounds of commercial confidentiality. There are other exemptions as well. Extending freedom of information to another category of organisation does not necessarily change that fact, which is set out in the Act. I do not think the case can be made that extending freedom of information would have prevented supplier failure, of which some examples have been given this afternoon.

Let me move on to what is already done to provide information, because it is important to assess where we are working from. It is already policy for Departments to publish information during and after the awarding of a contract, with the exception of information that is commercially confidential, as I have said. That information includes a range of details. The Government’s model services contract includes clauses that reinforce that increased transparency.

The Government are now going even further and we will publish information about how our most important contracts are performing against their contractual targets. That will, of course, hold both Government and our suppliers to account. As well as increasing transparency for citizens to monitor outcomes, we think that this change will drive behaviour and improvements in delivery where they are needed. In addition, Departments are now required to publish their own commercial pipelines twice yearly, which is important to the public.

Since the Information Commissioner first published a report on this subject in 2015, the Government have introduced a range of measures to increase transparency. No doubt hon. Members have made use of the Contracts Finder website, where data can be found, and data.gov.uk, where details on spend can be found. In 2016, the transparency principles were also introduced, which make it clear to suppliers what information from bids will be released, and that any genuinely sensitive information should be highlighted with procuring Departments. That all ensures that citizens can see a clear public record of how Government money is spent on public contracts, and with what results.

I said I would turn to where information is held between the public authority and the contractor. Again, the Independent Commission on Freedom of Information looked at the issue of private contractors providing public services. First, it concluded that “extending the Act directly to private companies…would be burdensome and unnecessary.”

However, it went on to say that “information concerning the performance or delivery…should be treated as being held on behalf of the contracting public authority.”

Our amended freedom of information code of practice sets out that public authorities should agree what information is held on their behalf with private companies when entering into contracts, that those arrangements should be set out clearly and, indeed, that requests made to private companies providing public services
should be passed to the relevant authority to answer. At present, therefore, the Government feel that the Freedom of Information Act strikes broadly the right balance.

Before I close, I will deal briefly with how the Act currently functions. Of course, the point has been made by the hon. Member for Hammersmith that secondary legislation is easy to use in this space. As he knows, orders can be made under section 5 of the Act, if it appears that particular bodies are exercising functions of a public nature; a number of other specifications are also made in that section. Such an order must be preceded by consultation with every person to whom it relates or with persons appearing to represent them.

I come back to the point that, although it may appear that section 5 orders are a straightforward and quick way to bring particular bodies into scope, the provisions in the legislation require consultation with all affected parties, and they further require a careful definition of what information that is held should fall within the Act. That is complex to do, and carries risks.

Adding to the scope of the Act through section 5 also requires a debate in both Houses. Some examples have been given of where these provisions have been used most recently, but I raise this matter to emphasise that the process is not necessarily a quick or straightforward one, and indeed that it is a virtue that such a process is set out in the Act already. Although the process is neither quick nor simple, it is the process that we should use to assess questions about scope.

To conclude, before obviously leaving time for the hon. Gentleman to sum up the debate, I say again that the Government are committed to the principles of transparency and openness across the public sector. We are proud of our reputation as a leader on data transparency. Indeed, we have evidence of that from one particular index that ranks the UK as eighth in the world for transparency, which is an important record. Transparency is crucial to deliver the public value for money, to assist taxpayers and to get the best services for citizens. However, proactive publication needs to be balanced with the other considerations that I hope I have set out for the Chamber today. The Freedom of Information Act is a very important tool in that box of transparency and the Government are absolutely committed to it. We want to see freedom of information used widely, but I hope that it has helped the Chamber today that I have set out some additional considerations in response to the hon. Gentleman’s arguments.

3.56 pm

Andy Slaughter: I am grateful to all those who have attended and taken part in this debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) used some very good examples from his constituency, but he also exhibited his encyclopaedic knowledge of this subject and his long track record of pushing for freedom of information. I think that he and I feel that we may be getting somewhere at last.

I also thank the shadow Housing Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), for attending the first part of the debate. He did not speak because of his elevated status, but I know he has a particular interest in housing association issues and particularly the issues around Grenfell. I am grateful to him for his support.

I also thank the two Opposition Front-Bench spokespersons, my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) and the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), for their comments and associate myself with them.

The Minister, in her usual gracious way, put the Government’s argument as best she could, but it is wearing a little thin on these issues, as she conceded when saying, in response to my request for a fuller review, that there was the Burns commission. She quoted the matters relating to private contractors’ rights, but on the whole the Burns commission was sympathetic to the points that we are putting forward today. I hope that, when the response to the Information Commissioner’s report comes through, we may at last see some movement.

I remain hopeful, as always. I have noticed that there have been three private Members’ Bills in the past two years that would not perhaps have been expected to receive Government support: the Homelessness Reduction Act 2018; the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018, which was put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck); and the equal civil partnerships Bill, which I believe is shortly to be enacted, once it has completed its stages in the House. Indeed, there are more recent examples of the Government taking over the Bills on upskirting and female genital mutilation. I am sure that that must be happening in so many cases because of the Government’s generosity and not because of their lack of a majority.

I therefore remain hopeful that—perhaps not in this Session and perhaps not even in the form of a Bill sponsored by me—a Bill of the kind that I have brought forward to extend freedom of information in the way that I have indicated will be achieved, and in the very near future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered extending the Freedom of Information Act 2000 to housing associations and public contractors.
Sir Henry Bellingham in the Chair

3.59 pm

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered rail services in south-east London.

It is a particular pleasure to speak in this debate with you, Sir Henry, my long-term friend and colleague, in the Chair; it is a real privilege to do so.

I am grateful to be able to raise an extremely important issue that affects my borough of Bexley, and north-west Kent—indeed, it is a common problem across south-east London and north-west Kent—and that issue is rail services. I had hoped that I would not need to raise it again, but, unfortunately, improvements have not been forthcoming. It therefore remains a real concern for my constituents and for the constituents of my neighbours, who I am particularly pleased to see in their places: my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon); the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce); my neighbour and fellow campaigner for better rail services in Bexley, the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce).

My constituents, and residents across the borough of Bexley, are entirely dependent on Southeastern when travelling into central London to commute and to work, or for social or other reasons. However, that operator has a poor reputation in our area. Bexley has endured a terrible rail service, with delays and cancellations occurring regularly. In our area, we have no underground services that could be used as an alternative, so Southeastern has a monopoly, but it is failing its customers on a regular basis. Warm words and apologies will not suffice when action is required; although I apologise that I did not mention the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook); I had thought he was here for the previous debate, but it is great to see him as well, because we all suffer from this appalling rail service.

The 2018 rail passenger survey found that just 78% of commuters were satisfied with their journey—a 2% decrease from the previous year. A mere 39% thought they got value for money, which is 5% below the average for London and the south-east. Only 72% were satisfied with the punctuality and reliability of trains, which represented no improvement from the autumn of the previous year. That shows that Southeastern is not heading in the right direction. Trains are constantly delayed, even if only for a short time. Between 2010-11 and 2017-18, Southeastern achieved its right time measure for only 62% of its main line and metro services. I regularly travel to London from my home in Barnehurst, which is in my constituency, and we recently suffered as a consequence of the Barnehurst landslip. While I appreciate that these things occur and cannot be predicted, that was the fourth landslip along the same cutting in the past 10 years, which is totally unacceptable.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on having secured this important debate. He is absolutely right: when a landslide last happened along that line, questions were asked in this House about surveying the infrastructure to ensure it would not happen again, yet it keeps happening.

Sir David Evennett: The hon. Gentleman is quite right. We have been ignored, which is unacceptable. Travellers have faced huge disruption, with little or no support from the operator, Southeastern.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on having secured the debate. He, and every Member in this Chamber, is a veteran of the campaign to improve rail services for our constituents. Does he agree that one way to improve the reliability of the service would be for a decision to be made about the franchise, which seems to be a never-ending process? I understand that a decision needs to be made by April. The making of that decision is imperative, so that investment in future services for our constituents can be forthcoming.

Sir David Evennett: I totally agree with my hon. Friend, and I will be coming to that point later.

Network Rail, of course, is responsible for the tracks and for the problems that we have had with the landslip. I recently met with its route managing director, John Halsall, to discuss the situation, and he understood that it was unacceptable. There is nothing new in that; it is unacceptable.

Network Rail has regularly let down rail users, but it is not just that: Southeastern has been unable to act when contingency plans are required. It never seems to have them, and it does not provide information to our constituents about what is going on. It supposedly put extra trains on to the Erith and Sidcup line during the Barnehurst landslip, but many of us used that service when the Bexleyheath line was out of action, and when we got to Charing Cross or wherever, those trains were cancelled. The extra trains that Southeastern put on did not exist, so it is no good Southeastern saying that it is looking after the customer, because it most certainly is not.

As I have always said, Southeastern’s timetable is a work of fiction at the best of times; it was even more so on that occasion. The overcrowding, the cancellations and the distress caused to constituents who were trying to get home, pick up children from childcare, get to meetings or whatever were appalling.

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): Southeastern is full to busting at the moment, and given all the new development in my patch and in the right hon. Gentleman’s patch, does he share my concern about how on earth Southeastern is going to manage when it cannot manage at the moment? Does he believe that those developments will increase the risk of critical failure, given that the system will be overworked?

Sir David Evennett: The hon. Lady makes a good point. Our area is ripe for further development, which is what we want. We want jobs, houses and opportunities, but we cannot have those without infrastructure. If the infrastructure cannot cope with that development, more problems are going to occur.

The Minister may be able to tell us different, but I believe no other rail network has had as many problems as ours. The excuses for delays and cancellations beggar...
believe: bad weather, leaves on the line, snow, low-level sunshine, overrunning road engineering works, and even drivers not turning up at Dartford because their taxi from Gravesend did not arrive on time. Southeastern could not run the train from Dartford because the driver did not turn up—it is really appalling. There have been breakdowns en route and doors that will not close—the list goes on and on. In my view, older rolling stock is the cause of some of these issues, not maintenance.

Many of my constituents have been appallingly disappointed that no decision has been made about the new franchise, as was mentioned earlier. That ought to have been in place by now, but we have just extended the existing franchise, which is one of the worst possible options that we could have chosen. If the operator cannot invest for the future, it is not going to do anything.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. There have been two extensions to the franchise; the latest, I think, takes us up to 22 June. Does he agree that our constituents at least deserve to know pretty soon who the new operator will be, so they can have some confidence that, going forward, that new operator is going to improve the service?

Sir David Evennett: I totally agree with that. The sooner we know, the better, so the new operator can get cracking on what needs to be done to improve the service.

The new franchise contains some good proposals. Working more closely with Network Rail will be a great improvement, because I do not think the operator and Network Rail work together terribly well at the moment. We welcome the fact that there will be direct services from Bexleyheath to Abbey Wood, tougher demands for reliability and more frequent services to Charing Cross. However, with no decision having been made and no action, we suffer more and more, and our constituents have had enough. I know that the Minister is relatively new to his post, but I have a high opinion of him, and he is well respected across the House. I hope he will take some action within his Department.

Teresa Pearce: On the point about the new franchise, commuters in the right hon. Gentleman's constituency and in mine have journeys that are meant to be about 30 to 40 minutes, but Delay Repay kicks in only if people are 30 minutes late. Under the new franchise, it will kick in if they are 15 minutes late. Does he agree that as Southeastern has opted to bid for the new franchise, it should bring in that change now?

Sir David Evennett: That would show good faith to the public, who are suffering from that situation now, would it not? I totally agree with the hon. Lady, and I hope that a 15-minute Delay Repay policy will motivate whoever holds the new franchise to operate a better service.

As the Minister will know, we have been blighted by endless signal failures at Lewisham, which again have caused misery, delays and cancellations. Sometimes, once those signals start to go wrong, they go wrong all through the day—it is unbelievable. We have already suffered from the London Bridge development, which caused considerable distress and disappointment. I understand from Network Rail that it is going to fix the signalling problems at Lewisham; it is going to start this Easter and finish next Easter, in 12 months' time. Do we have to continue to suffer over the next year? Frankly, that is not acceptable.

There is also the problem of Crossrail. We were hopeful that Crossrail from Abbey Wood would give us an alternative and be part of what we need, but, regrettably, that has been delayed. It should have happened last December, but we do not yet have a date for when it is expected to be operational. That is a huge disappointment for our constituents. I know that it is not the Minister's responsibility, but that of Transport for London and the London Mayor, but he should put more pressure on to get a date, at least, for when it will start. We have no date.

The other thing I want to raise is something we have been campaigning for. Originally, Crossrail was not going to stop at Abbey Wood, but would go to Ebbsfleet, and we are really keen to see that happen. We have had meetings with the Secretary of State. He came down, along with the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead and me, to have a look at what could be done and to have discussions with the council. An extension there would be so welcome. Other parts of the capital have Crossrail going out much further. We, who do not have an underground and have a poor rail service, have been put on the back-burner.

Gareth Johnson: My right hon. Friend mentioned Ebbsfleet. Does he agree that this is not so much about an extension out to Ebbsfleet as it is about completing the project as originally envisaged? We have High Speed 1 there, but it is increasingly overcrowded for my constituents who use it. Having Crossrail go out to Ebbsfleet as originally planned is exactly what the Government's policy should still be today.

Sir David Evennett: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Solutions are what are needed. I therefore hope that the Crossrail to Ebbsfleet campaign proposals will go forward to a full business case, allowing for a detailed engineering design, land and financial modelling, and a legal framework to be progressed, because then we could get the plan on the books to look at it. Extending Crossrail is not just for commuters; it would allow a redevelopment of our area for jobs and houses eastwards along the south Thames.

Clive Efford: The right hon. Gentleman is being generous in giving way. I agree with absolutely everything he is saying about transport infrastructure. He has already referred to this, but I want to underline the fact that south-east London is a desert when it comes to infrastructure. If the rail service breaks down, we have no alternative. There is no direct access to the underground for those who are slightly away from the river. That is a real problem for south-east London and it needs to be addressed.

Sir David Evennett: I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman. I hope that the Minister will look seriously at other alternatives we could also have, such as going
into Thamesmead or wherever with the docklands light railway or something. That could help not only our regeneration, but the existing population who live there and need to commute.

I will not go into all the benefits that an extension of Crossrail to Ebbsfleet would bring, other than that it would help to deliver the Government’s housing and industrial strategies, directly unlocking 55,000 homes and 50,000 jobs, as well as supporting thousands more across the sub-region. It would also deliver a vital strategic link between HS1 destinations, Canary Wharf and London City airport, and onwards to the City of London and Heathrow. With our roads so congested in south-east London, it would be a godsend to travellers and commuters. The Department has certainly procrastinated a bit on this matter and we need some action.

The Thames gateway has huge potential for economic growth and development. It has huge opportunities for the development of brownfield sites, yet connectivity is significantly holding things back. In pushing forward the original plans, we would have a unique opportunity to transform our area. When the Secretary of State visited Bexley, we highlighted the problems with our existing rail service, the problems with there being no decision on the franchise, the problems with Crossrail and the problem that when things break down, we are in difficulty.

We need the new franchise. We need Crossrail to open. We need the finance to pursue the business case for the Crossrail to Ebbsfleet campaign. I hope the Minister will respond positively.

I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks wants to say a couple of words, if that is acceptable, Sir Henry. He has a slightly different perspective, being somewhat further out into Kent. We are suburban south-east London and Dartford, and we are a little region.

It is a privilege to be able to raise these matters on behalf of my constituents and my borough, and neighbouring boroughs and constituents. Their Members of Parliament have worked tirelessly together, across parties, to get things done and to improve the facilities and services for our constituents.

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): We have just heard a superb example of how to present a Westminster Hall debate. With the permission of the right hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Sir David Evennett) and the Minister, I call the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon) to make a brief contribution.

4.17 pm

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his brevity.

Andrew Jones: It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I, too, congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Sir David Evennett) on securing this important debate. Many important issues have been raised, and I will be scurrying through trying to answer all the comments from colleagues, including on the landslip that my right hon. Friend raised with me before the debate. As he is a vigorous champion for his constituency, I will also talk about the infrastructure works, Southeastern’s performance, Crossrail and Ebbsfleet.

I will start with the landslip at Barnehurst. Landslips cause significant delays and cancellations, as trains obviously have no real capacity to deal with any kind of small obstacle. If there is debris on the track after a landslip, Network Rail will often need to re-route services to enable the landslip to be cleared and the infrastructure to be checked to ensure that it is safe and operational. There are always concerns, even after a small landslip, that the slope may be permanently weakened. Some of the slopes, or cuttings, on the side of the tracks may need to be strengthened as a result. That may include improved drainage or adding stronger materials to the slope, such as steel rods or soil nails, and that work can take some time.

The landslip at Barnehurst took place on 11 February and the service was not fully reopened until the following week on Monday 18 February. That was a significant inconvenience for the travelling public in the area, but work has been done to mitigate future landslips. I know that it has been a regular problem in the area, and to help to prevent further landslips Network Rail has installed remote sensors and cameras that send its visual information, about the condition of the cutting.
Andrew Jones: I am coming on to the next franchise, but I should point out that we are seeing a fantastic change to the rolling stock right across our nation. We are going through a change that is equivalent to when we went from steam to diesel, with about 7,000 new vehicles entering service across our nation.

There were clear concerns about Southeastern’s performance. It has been improving recently and remains stable. Cancellations are reducing. A key change has been the improved collaboration between Southeastern and Network Rail. The latest statistics on the public performance measure indicate that 88.1% of services arrive at their final destination within five minutes of the planned arrival time. Today, it is 96%—I checked just before coming into the Chamber. However, we recognise that there is much to do, and we want the trains to be on time every time.

The issue of Lewisham signalling was raised, which is a significant piece of work. More than £130 million worth of work will take place between now and Easter 2020. This Easter, £55 million will be invested in the Lewisham, Woolwich and Charlton area. In Easter 2020, £81 million will be invested in the Hither Green area. All of that will upgrade the signalling to provide a more robust service.

I cannot announce to the House when a decision will be made on the next franchise. The current franchise was extended in December, and the agreement will now expire, as was said, on 23 June. We are still in the process of evaluating the agreement for the next franchise. It has taken longer than anticipated because we want to ensure that passengers get the best possible deal. The invitation to tender is expected to bring some significant benefits in the new franchise, including longer trains, more space for passengers, increased availability of staff and improved communication with passengers, especially during periods of disruption. A comment regularly made whenever there is disruption is, “Just tell us what’s going on.” That is the voice of passengers, and it has not been as strong as it should have been.

Gareth Johnson: As the Minister will know, I was very pleased to have the Oyster card extended to Dartford. Does he agree that the provision of smart ticketing must be included within any new franchise agreement?

Andrew Jones: I strongly support smart ticketing, and it will be in the next south-eastern franchise. It is popular with customers, and helps them with the convenience of their journey, though it is tough to deliver. We have also had requests regarding Delay Repay compensation. The next south-eastern franchise will include Delay Repay compensation kicking in from 15 minutes of delay. Alongside that we will see new services on Sundays, and wi-fi and mobile connectivity. I am keen to bring that significant range of customer benefits to the constituents whom the Members present serve as soon as possible. I have heard what has been said about the urgency of delivering it, and I will update the House as soon as we can.

I share both the excitement about the scale of Crossrail and what it will deliver for the country and the frustration that it will not be delivered on time. The Crossrail board decided to delay the opening on 29 August last year, and informed the Government of that. We do not yet have a new date for the opening. I have met representatives of Crossrail to press the case. I want to see the scheme
out there as fast as possible. It will increase capacity and rail transport in London by 10%, and bring an extra 1.5 million people within 45 commuting minutes of London’s key business districts.

On extending Crossrail or, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) said, completing it, I am instinctively sympathetic to the idea that transport investment is a driver of economic growth. It unlocks potential for commercial and residential opportunity. I fully understand the strategic importance—not just in the areas represented by the Members present, but nationally—of the potential of the Thames estuary. A strategic outline business case has been submitted to the Department, looking at options to extend Crossrail to Ebbsfleet. We are considering those proposals and will respond to the promoters in due course. I cannot give a date yet, but I recognise the urgency.

I will look at the points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon) regarding fares. The Government want to help people to keep more of their own money. That is why we have increased the personal allowance, and why we are in our sixth year of freezing the regulated fares, or capping them so that they can increase only in line with inflation. However, I will look at the specific points mentioned. I will also look at the point about Maidstone. We are certainly committed to improving regular services between Maidstone and the City as soon as possible, and we are working very closely with the industry to finalise plans for the remaining stages of the Thameslink timetable. That work includes future services from Maidstone East.

I fully recognise the importance of rail to the constituents served by colleagues present. Work is taking place to strengthen the area around the Barnehurst landslip, and we are working to bring the matter of the franchise to a conclusion as quickly as possible, so that people know where they stand and the travelling public receive the benefits. I thank right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. I hope to leave the travelling public watching the debate with the clear impression that we are working to give them the rail service that they deserve.

Question put and agreed to.

Kurdistan Region in Iraq

4.30 pm

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered bilateral relations with the Kurdistan region in Iraq.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. It has been nearly two years since our last debate on bilateral relations with the Kurdistan region of Iraq. The political context has changed dramatically and is now improving quickly for the Kurds and for Iraq more widely.

When we last debated this matter, we were weeks away from a referendum on the principle of eventual and negotiated independence from Iraq. I supported the referendum, whereas the all-party parliamentary group for the Kurdistan region in Iraq, which I chair, broadly took a neutral position but supported the Iraqi Kurds’ right to self-determination. The APPG sent observers to the referendum, including the former UK security envoy, Sir Simon Mayall, who disagreed with the referendum. We observed it in Irbil, Kirkuk and Slemani on 25 September 2017. It was clearly a joyous and colourful day, and the result was also clear: a 93% vote for independence on a 72% turnout.

Nothing changed much on 26 September, the day after the referendum, and the Kurds hope to keep negotiating with Baghdad—maybe not for full statehood, but for confederation or genuine federalism. The referendum was a reaction to the failure of federalism and the feeling that the Kurds could no longer rely on Baghdad, which had grown increasingly hostile to them. After the referendum, Baghdad quickly realised these fears by blocking the airports for six months and issuing punitive diktats to stop international money transfers. Worse than that was its use of the army to seize Kirkuk, that violated the constitution, which bars the use of the military to settle internal conflicts. Some 100 peshmerga were crushed to death by Iraqi army tanks and Iranian proxy militia, using the same tanks that were sent there to help deliver the defeat of Daesh.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate, and I am following his speech with great interest. Given the fact that if it had not been for the Kurds, Daesh would have been all over Iraq, does he agree that the reaction of the Iraqi Government was even more extraordinary? When the Iraqi army was in full flight, it was only the Kurds who prevented Kirkuk from being taken by Daesh, and they also saved Irbil. Without the Kurds, Daesh would probably still be in control of Iraq.

Jack Lopresti: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that the Kurdish peshmerga saved Iraq. When the Iraqi army dumped its weapons and ran, the peshmerga took up arms and helped contain Daesh. They were then instrumental in pushing them back. I will come on to that later in my remarks.

As my hon. Friend just said, Kirkuk had been saved by the peshmerga in 2014, but Kirkuk turned against the Kurds after the referendum. Their language was banned and their flag torn down, and Shi’a militia displayed photos of Ayatollah Khomeini in the governor’s
office where we met Najmaldin Karim, who only just escaped with his life thanks to an American tip-off. Arson, rape, murder and extortion fuelled a mass exodus of Kurds from Kirkuk, and the situation there is not yet back to how it was in the past. I ask the Minister to make it clear that Kirkuk and other territories are still disputed and should be subject to article 140 of the 2005 Iraqi constitution, which promised resolution of the Kurds’ final status by 2007. I ask the Minister to encourage the UN mission in Iraq to make that a much bigger priority.

The Iraqi forces then sought to invade the Kurdistan region but were repulsed at several battles. France, Germany and the Holy See broke the diplomatic blockade by sending an invitation to the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government, Nechirvan Barzani, who was able to transit via the land border—obviously the airports were out of use. Thankfully Baghdad backed down, and the KRG has parked the referendum result for now. I put on record that whatever the tactical or strategic wisdom of the referendum, I am disgusted by Baghdad’s violence, which was carried out, ironically, in the name of upholding a constitution that it had flouted. Its opening article states that Iraq is a “voluntary union”.

Fortunately, the supposed strongman in Baghdad, Haider al-Abadi, lost the premiership. His successor, Adel Abdul Mahdi, who once fought alongside the peshmerga, seems to be a much more reasonable character. A host of positive measures have now been agreed. Stranded oil in Kirkuk will eventually be piped via Kurdistan, and there seems to be a deal in the offing that finds a third way between total Kurdish or Iraqi control of Kurdish oil. Some will be sold by Baghdad in return for guaranteed salary payments to KRG civil servants and peshmerga, and some will be sold by the KRG. Internal customs posts are being demolished, which means that Shia’a militia can no longer extort duties and that Kurdistan can again become a dynamic gateway from the world to Iraq.

I think that is a positive and a potentially win-win position for all sides. Baghdad and Irbil are finding myriad ways to rebuild their relations, and we can do much more to make a strong KRG within a unified and fully federal Iraq. The Kurds might one day seek independence, as is their right, but not for now and perhaps not for a very long time.

The Minister will know that the UK is highly respected in Kurdistan. Many political leaders hold British passports, English is the second language and there is a strong Kurdish diaspora here in the UK. Four Kurdish universities teach only in English, and our active consul-general, Martin Warr, ably flies the flag and looks after and promotes our interests there. I praise the work of the British Council.

The UK Government are assisting the KRG’s reform programme by encouraging a modern Finance Ministry and the professionalisation of the peshmerga. I pay particular tribute to our servicemen and women at the Zorbash base in Irbil for their work. I visited their camp on two or three occasions and have always been impressed by their professionalism and what they are doing to help train the peshmerga in things like counter-improvised explosive device measures and how to train their own troops and keep a cohesive military force.
Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) on securing this important debate. He is the excellent chair of the all-party group for the Kurdistan region of Iraq, of which I am pleased to be a member. Although I have not visited the region yet, it has been an honour to meet representatives of the Kurdistan Regional Government, MPs and others from Kurdistan through my involvement with the group. It has been enlightening and valuable to learn about the region and its past struggles, and particularly about its pro-western values, its immense religious tolerance, which is unique in the middle east, and its role as the primary force in defeating Daesh.

I want to focus on early-day motion 2122, which I tabled last week, on establishing direct flights between the UK and the Kurdistan region. It focuses on an issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised and which has been pursued by the all-party group with Ministers over a number of years. We tabled it following the news that the KRG high representative to the UK, Karwan Jamal Tahir, recently met representatives of British Airways, which is considering establishing direct flights to Irbil from Heathrow from next summer.

As things stand, there is no choice but to travel via a third country. I am sure hon. Members agree that there is no incentive for companies from the UK or from across the Atlantic to explore the business opportunities that are available, especially as the region’s economy improves due to the increased stability between the Kurdistan region and Baghdad, if there is no opportunity to fly there directly. I know from my airport, Newcastle International, about the importance of seeking new markets, particularly after Brexit. Connectivity is a primary factor for businesses, as it enables them to trade abroad.

A survey has deemed Irbil the fifth safest city in the world, and direct flights would surely encourage more tourism to that beautiful region, which has a wealth of cultural history. A lift in tourism would strengthen the region’s economy and help to diversify it away from reliance on oil reserves. I am quite able to fly to Chicago—the most dangerous city in the whole world, in terms of murders—to visit my daughter, but not to a safer country. We should perhaps bear that in mind when considering where is safe for people in the UK to go.

Mr Hollobone: I am listening to the hon. Lady’s speech with great interest—she makes a powerful point. Is she aware that Kurdistan attracts 2 million visitors per year for its tourism industry? Although it has a well-established tourism industry, very few of those tourists are westerners. Given that 95% of the economy is dependent on oil, she is absolutely right about the urgent need to diversify.
Mary Glindon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for emphasising that particular point. I think it adds fuel to the fire of why we want that situation to change.

The prospect of enhanced business connections and increased tourist travel depends on whether the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will consider revising its travel advice to UK travellers. At present, the advice means that UK travellers have to buy extra travel insurance, on top of their ordinary annual global insurance, to travel to Kurdistan. That sends out completely the wrong message to would-be travellers, who might question why they have to go for that extra insurance, and perhaps suggests to them that there might be more safety problems than there actually are. We do not want to deter would-be travellers from visiting that beautiful country.

Although the Government have to be cautious and do all they can to ensure the safety of all UK citizens, wherever we may be or are travelling to, in the light of the increased stability in the region—the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke referred to it—which boasts English as its second language, I hope that the Minister will tell us that her Department will give serious and urgent consideration to revising advice for travel to Kurdistan, and that many more people will be able to enjoy all the delights that that wonderful region in Iraq has to offer.

4.52 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) for his speech introducing the debate.

I want to move away from the areas that my hon. Friend covered to look at some of the capacity-building and humanitarian aid issues that occur in the country. If one thinks back, only a few years ago the humanitarian aid made available to Kurdistan was not reaching its target by around 63%. The UN could manage only 37% of its aid fund target. We have to ask why, and maybe the Minister will be kind enough to give a take on that.

It is crucial, in the light of the history of warfare with Daesh and the huge number of people who have been caught up in it, that the humanitarian aid for the crisis is more prevalent there than in other regions. The area’s need for humanitarian assistance is much greater and we should therefore mention that there is and has been a major short-term funding gap in the provision of humanitarian aid for the country. That need for humanitarian aid is not finished—it is still growing because of the result of the conflict; the aid needs to be predictable; and improvements need to be seen and appreciated on the ground.

A number of things are putting enormous pressure on the provision of that humanitarian aid, one of which is the mass movement of people. Where there is a mass movement of people, there will always be a need for more humanitarian aid. As to a country where there is such need for that aid, it is difficult to talk of the need for capacity building, but I will mention five points in no particular order. They are not ordered by priority, but are just my thoughts on a number of issues.

First, I want to stress the need for capacity building in the provision of gender equality. There are two aspects to gender equality: the provision of humanitarian aid and the way women and girls have been treated as a result of the prevalence of Daesh in the area for so long. The number of vulnerable women is quite large, and they are vulnerable whether or not they are the female heads of their households. There is an enormous risk of gender-based violence and there have been absolutely horrific reports of sexual and gender-based violence throughout the region.

We need to concentrate on a number of things to improve women’s ability to survive and function in that society. A larger point on that, as we look to build an area with a great deal of capacity in future, is to ensure that women can use their skills to the best of their ability and that they play a full role, whether in politics, the economy or whatever it may be. We need to make sure that there is a tremendous amount of activity on that.

My second point on capacity building, which may seem a little strange in that these aspects are chalk and cheese, relates to cultural heritage. The UK has an enormous capacity in archaeological and cultural artefacts. In fact, I must admit that I am a product of that, having spent most of my early years as an archaeologist. I am not volunteering to go out to Kurdistan to provide the information and the training that people need, but I think we should make use of the skills that we have in the UK to deal with the tremendous trashing of cultural heritage in that region. One has only to look at the activities of Daesh there to see the effect it has on many people.

The third area is education, which my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke mentioned in the context of further education. We should be building capacity not just in further education, but in education throughout the lives of young people in the area. We should not necessarily concentrate solely on academic education, but we need to provide the skills that people need to ensure that the programmes of placements can be improved enormously—I have seen in other parts of the world how our concentration on education can achieve enormous results.

The fourth area is in the medical field. We have already heard that 10,000 people were injured in Kurdistan, and they need treatment. We need hospitals and qualified doctors to be able to provide that, and I think that a tremendous amount of capacity building could take place there to improve that situation.

The last point that I will raise, which encompasses all those things, is about dealing with corruption. I have a lot of experience of dealing with corruption—I am the Prime Minister’s trade envoy to Nigeria, after all. The way corruption is dealt with needs to be tackled and made specific to each country. Corruption is not corruption is not corruption is a much broader picture there. Where there are not effective institutions that can function properly, there will always be a risk of corruption. Corruption is corrosive on everyone. It needs to be tackled head on.

Those are the five areas that I would recommend that the Department for International Trade and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office concentrate on. That does not take away the need for humanitarian aid, but those are the areas we need to concentrate on next as we develop.
5 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is always a pleasure and a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) on introducing the debate. My first contact with Iraqi Kurdistan was in 2010, when I received a telephone call from the then Chief Whip of my party, asking me whether I would be willing to fly via Vienna—no direct flights even then—to Irbil in order to speak to the Kurdistan regional Parliament about the importance of opposition parties. That was a good introduction to being in opposition in 2010, which was fairly new to us after 13 years in government. I had been to Iraq once before, in 1980, but I had never been to the north, to Irbil.

As the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke said, what a surprise it was to arrive in a region of a middle eastern Arab country that I had visited so long ago—it was quite progressive in 1980 and went downhill after that—and to see the progress being made. What a surprise to see how that Parliament was developing, and to see the Kurdish values that I already know from my constituency, where we have a small but substantial population of Kurdish refugees in the city of Leeds, who sadly are now increasing. I saw for myself what was going on, and it felt like a separate nation. It felt like a region that was going to secede from the Republic of Iraq any time soon, because the values seemed so different. We were told that a visa was needed to go from Baghdad to Irbil at that time.

I was fortunate to go back to Irbil and Slemani just a year later with the all-party parliamentary group, under the leadership of the hon. Gentleman’s predecessor, and with the secretary, Gary Kent, who knows the region and the country very well. During that visit we learnt more about the Anfal—the terrible slaughter of Kurds because they were Kurds under Saddam’s presidency. We learnt what the Halabja gas attack really meant for men, women and children. We heard more about that in a conference two or three years ago in London on the anniversary of the 1988 atrocity. The Labour, coalition and Conservative Governments have since learned—we have agreed—that was genocide.

There is no doubt that the violence by the then leadership of Iraq was aimed at the Kurds. The Kurds always seem to attract the wrath of the regimes in the region. Let us look at what is happening in Turkey—nothing like what happened in Iraq, but quite a lot of oppression—and in Syria and Iran. But it is in Iraq that there has been the only regional autonomy, until the referendum—as the hon. Gentleman so clearly stated, until the disgusting attack and oppression by the Iraqi army in Kurdistan. We were all shocked by that violence. I was in regular contact with Gary Kent at the time.

The Opposition believe in people’s right to self-determination, in whatever part of the world. I know the Minister will emphasise that too. If they have cultural integrity, linguistic individuality and cultural separateness, no matter the religion, they have the right to self-determination, to decide for themselves what their future as a nation should and could be.

In talking to the families of the victims of the Anfal in 2011, I was struck by the comparison they made to the holocaust of the Jewish people in the second world war. I come from a Jewish background—it meant a lot to me; it meant a lot to me. My family died in the holocaust and in the concentration camps. To hear people of the Muslim faith, who are Kurds, talk about their empathy with the Jewish people and the state of Israel was a revelation. One MP said to me, “You know, if Israel opens an embassy in Baghdad tomorrow”—unlikely, but perhaps more likely today than it was seven or eight years ago—“they will open one the next day in Irbil. We would welcome an Israeli presence here.” I had never heard anybody in the region say that before, and I was struck by it.

When we drove from Slemani on that road route back to Irbil, I took a number of photographs—we were delayed by a whole load of sheep crossing the road. I was struck by the similarity of the countryside to my native Yorkshire, which I have represented for 22 years. When I showed the photograph to my wife, she asked if it was Ilkley moor. I replied, “No, this is an area you won’t visit. This is Slemani to Irbil.” She was as shocked as everyone else.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising such an important issue. He said that the Kurds could no longer rely on Baghdad. He pointed to the army seizing Kirkuk after that referendum was crushed. He talked, most importantly of all, of the Kurdish peshmerga saving Iraq. The Opposition would certainly concur with that. They contained Daesh through their bravery and extraordinary organisation. Their army contains men and women—something unseen and unheard of in the region.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon), who has considerable experience of Iraqi Kurdistan and Iraqi Kurdistan and the Kurdish cause, talked about the direct flights issue. Anyone who has been to Irbil knows what a struggle it is to have to change in Vienna, or whichever third country, but it is much more important than that. If they are going to develop tourism, as she said, there must be direct flights. The contrast with Chicago was a brilliant one, because I got that feeling too. I am sure every other right hon. and hon. Member who has been to Irbil, and had the pleasure of seeing school children in Slemani dancing the local dance and of listening to the music of the region, will know that it is a safer, more accommodating and more welcoming city than Chicago or many other American cities. They will have felt safer and not vulnerable, and that nobody was out to attack them. That is very important to the development of business and communities, and to economic development in general.

The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) talked about the need for humanitarian assistance. We should never forget how important that is; that need may well still be growing, as he indicated. Gender inequality and the risk of gender-based violence is something we need always to be aware of and to combat.

Between 1986 and 1989, about 180,000 people—the numbers are disputed—perished in the Anfal. The UK supported the creation of the Iraqi constitution after the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The Kurdistan Regional Government were formalised in the present constitution of Iraq in 2005. The UK has given military and financial assistance to the peshmerga, especially during the ISIS surge. I hate to quote him, but the former Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), stated that...
[Fabian Hamilton]

"we owe a great debt to the Peshmerga for their bravery and sacrifice. What they are doing is on behalf of all of us."

That is perhaps one of the few things I have agreed with him about over the years.

Governments of all colours have agreed that it is important to have a strong Kurdistan region of Iraq, within a strong, successful, unified Iraq. We know that would ensure stability in the country and the whole region, which is why we are so concerned about the destabilising effect of what happened a couple of years ago. The Select Committee on Foreign Affairs stated in a report on the subject in 2018 that

"the FCO should support meaningful political participation and representation for Kurds, as well as cultural recognition, equal rights, and economic opportunities for them, underpinned by national constitutions and achieved through negotiation, as a means of fulfilling Kurdish aspirations. It is not in the UK's interests for any state to deny Kurdish identity through law or force."

I am sure that the Minister will refer to that.

The UK Government have played a diplomatic role in attempting to reduce tension between the Kurdish and the Iraqi federal Government. I pay tribute to the Foreign Office and to current Ministers for that. However, bafflingly, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside said, the Foreign Office still advises against all but essential travel to Iraqi Kurdistan, putting it in the same category as Baghdad and southern Iraq. That needs to change, and I hope we will hear more about that from the Minister.

In February 2019, one of the people I shadow, the Minister for the Middle East, announced £30 million in funding to help rebuild Iraq and to aid the economy. He visited the region in January 2019, and he gave particular support to policies preventing sexual violence in conflict areas in Iraq. As we know, since 2014 the Department for International Development has provided more than £250 million towards humanitarian assistance in Iraq, the vast majority of it in and around the Iraqi Kurdistan region. I hope that I have not stolen the Minister's thunder—she is also a DFID Minister.

The United Kingdom gives indirect support through international bodies such as the United Nations Development Programme funding facility for stabilisation, which has focused on areas liberated from ISIS. The UK trained more than 9,000 peshmerga in infantry, counter-IED, engineering and medical skills, and provided—I believe it continues to provide them—arms and ammunition to the peshmerga.

As we know, there are still no direct flights from the UK to Irbil in Iraqi Kurdistan. As Members have said, there have been rumours that British Airways will commence flights next year. Let us hope that happens and that the Government can encourage that. As I mentioned, the authorities in Iraqi Kurdistan are particularly proud of the religious tolerance in the region. The Kurdish authorities launched a commission to investigate crimes by ISIS, particularly against the Yazidis, during the conflict. I think we all welcome that.

I again congratulate the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke on bringing this important issue before us. Let us hope that we can continue to work together to ensure that the people of Iraqi Kurdistan have a truly autonomous future, that they can govern themselves, and that we can look forward to Irbil, Slemani and the many other cities of Iraqi Kurdistan being tourist destinations for everybody from Europe.

5.12 pm

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) on securing this debate and on his long-standing passion and interest in this area. I am probably the only person to speak in the debate who has not had the pleasure of visiting the Iraqi region of Kurdistan. Obviously, my colleague the Minister for the Middle East would usually have responded to such a debate, but he is travelling. He sends his apologies for not being able to take part.

We have heard a range of really interesting and enlightening speeches. I will start by trying to address some of the common points that were raised before recapping the UK’s long-standing partnership with the Kurdistan region of Iraq.

Some important issues have been raised. We heard questions about the UK’s position on the 2017 referendum for independence. Colleagues will want to know that we continue to support the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iraq. That is why we did not support the Kurdistan region’s referendum and do not recognise the results of the referendum. We believe that any referendum or political process towards independence must be taken as a result of an agreement with Baghdad and in line with the Iraqi constitution. We continue to help Iraq to build a more stable, prosperous and inclusive Iraq in which all Iraqis, including Iraq’s Kurds, have the security, jobs and opportunities they want and deserve.

The UK continues to encourage the Iraqi Government to resolve outstanding disputes with the Kurdistan Regional Government, and we continue to encourage the Kurdistan Regional Government to respect the Iraqi federal court ruling that the referendum was unconstitutional. At the right time, when both parties are ready, we would want both sides to return to substantial negotiations to resolve all outstanding issues, in line with the Iraqi constitution, including making further progress on oil and revenue sharing and the status of the disputed territories, so the Baghdad-Irbil relationship is placed on a more sustainable footing within a unified Iraq.

Turning to the specific question of Kirkuk, as my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke noted, in 2014 Daesh captured large swathes of territory in northern Iraq that were disputed between Baghdad and Irbil. As the Kurds pushed Daesh back, they controlled many of those disputed territories, including the oil-rich city of Kirkuk. Following the referendum on 25 September 2017, the federal Government of Baghdad reassigned control over those areas. The UK wants to see a long-term, peaceful and sustainable solution to the governance of those territories, in line with article 140 of the Iraqi constitution.

A number of colleagues raised the question of flights. Of course, individual airlines will want to make their own commercial decisions. I certainly thought that a range of colleagues made some powerful points in support of direct flights. The Foreign Office, the Home Office and the Department for Transport keep the issue
under constant review, as indeed we at the Foreign Office keep travel advice for the Kurdistan region of Iraq under constant review.

My hon. Friend also raised the question of visas. He may want to raise that question more directly with colleagues from the Home Office, but the Foreign Office can commit that we will continue to work with Home Office colleagues to ensure that the requirements for visas to the UK are clearly, simply and effectively communicated to those applying for them.

My hon. Friend raised important issues to do with the atrocities committed during the conflict. The UK took action in 2017 to secure United Nations Security Council resolution 2379, which established an investigative team to gather evidence of Daesh’s crimes in Iraq. That team has now deployed. It has the full support of this Government, and we continue to encourage the UN to make rapid progress on that important work.

My hon. Friend raised the question of an inward visit from Kurdistan to the UK. He will know that the Prime Minister herself visited Iraq in 2017, and he will appreciate that she had a bilateral meeting with President Salih last week in Sharm El Sheikh. We would be very glad, at the appropriate moment, to welcome a delegation from the Kurdistan region of Iraq to the UK.

The UK has long and historic links with the Kurdistan region of Iraq, which colleagues alluded to. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) raised the important work we have been doing on the humanitarian side through the Department for International Development. I did not realise that he had such an interesting experience of archaeology. I think he will be very interested in the British Museum’s Iraq scheme, which is funded by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and trains Iraqi archaeologists. It brings them to London for two months and then gives hands-on training in Iraq for a further two months. I think we can all agree wholeheartedly how important that is.

Successive British Governments have enjoyed a close working relationship with the Kurdistan Regional Government since its formation in Iraq in 1992. As a number of colleagues noted, we stood by the Iraqi people in 1991. We introduced safe havens, we protected thousands of lives in the Kurdistan region and we provided a refuge from the brutality of the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein for many years. We also stood by the Iraqi people in their fight against Daesh, and I take this opportunity to pay particular tribute to the courage and tenacity of the Kurdistan peshmerga and the Iraqi security forces in the face of the barbaric assault by Daesh on their livelihoods and their cultural identity.

I pay tribute to the incredible generosity of Iraqis from across the country, including the Kurdistan region of Iraq, in supporting millions of people displaced from their homes by the brutality of Daesh in Syria and Iraq. As an integral part of Iraq, the Kurdistan region is a natural partner for the UK. We share many strategic interests. We respect the Kurdish people and our relationship is strong.

The strength of our partnership was evident during the recent visit to Iraq, to which the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) alluded. During the visit, the Minister for the Middle East met senior politicians and leaders in Baghdad, as well as the Kurdish Prime Minister, Nechirvan Barzani, and Chancellor Masrour Barzani. He reiterated the United Kingdom’s deep and unwavering support to all Iraq. He also met representatives from Christian and Yazidi communities and stressed that all groups, regardless of religion or ethnicity, should be treated equally. We continue to emphasise to our partners the importance of upholding and protecting the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all minority communities in Iraq.

It is clear that Iraq, including the Kurdistan region, continues to face significant challenges. The UK remains committed to working in partnership with the Kurdistan Regional Government to ensure a successful Kurdistan inside a thriving, multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious Iraq.

As colleagues have noted, since 2014 the UK Government have committed over a quarter of a billion pounds-worth of humanitarian support to Iraq, including to the Kurdish region. That money has provided vital food, shelter, medicines and clean water to millions of people. In addition, we have committed over £110 million to Iraq since 2015 to help to stabilise the liberated areas and to enable internally displaced persons to return to repaired homes, with rebuilt water supplies and restored electricity networks.1 To be sustainable, that infrastructure support needs to be underpinned by an ongoing commitment to reconciliation and security. That is why we are supporting community-level reconciliation in the liberated areas of Iraq through our conflict, stability and security fund, which we believe will play a vital role in building long-term stability.

While Daesh no longer holds territory in Iraq, it continues to pose a security threat to the Kurdistan region of Iraq, and to other parts of the country. The UK is committed to working with the Iraqi Government and Kurdistan Regional Government to counter this security threat, through our ongoing support to the Iraqi security forces and to the Kurdish peshmerga. The success of the Kurdish region of Iraq requires much more than security capabilities. It also needs political and economic stability. We are encouraged by some early signs of a rapprochement between Baghdad and Irbil, and we will continue to support the strengthening of this critical relationship.

The formation of a Government in the Kurdistan region is crucial. The people of the Kurdistan region need a stable and functioning Government who can attract business and investment, grow the economy and provide much-needed jobs. Reform will be important too—not only to strengthen the economy, but to improve public services. The current leadership recognises that and we stand ready to support it in its efforts. We will continue to urge the political parties to conclude their negotiations as soon as possible, and set a forward-thinking programme of government focused on building prosperity and security for the people.

The UK’s commitment to the Kurdistan region of Iraq is long term, and we will continue to work with the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government to strengthen our partnership. Our defence and security support is helping to strengthen and reform the peshmerga; our humanitarian and stabilisation efforts are helping to rebuild communities; and our political support is helping to bring politicians closer together.

1[Official Report, 12 March 2019, Vol. 656, c. 2MC.]
so that trade and investment can grow the economy and bring the prosperity that the people of the Kurdistan region of Iraq want and deserve.

5.24 pm

Jack Lopresti: I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to this important debate and offered their support, from across the political divide.

I will not list all the Minister’s points, but I thank her for addressing important matters to do with disputed territories, religious freedom and tolerance, and giving hope on direct flights. I will take her advice and bring up matters about visas with the Home Office.

There were some kind comments from the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton). I agree with what he said when he reiterated what some of us had said about the peshmerga saving Iraq. Not only did they save Iraq; they also helped to a large degree in keeping our own streets safe and defeating some of our enemies. We owe them a huge debt of gratitude.

I was intrigued by my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) and his past in archaeology. I would be happy to spend some of my summer with him, because there are lots of artefacts, historic battlefields and great historical places to visit in Iraqi Kurdistan, where he could have a good dig around. I would implore anyone who has not yet done so to visit the region, for all the reasons we have discussed. It is a fantastic, wonderful place, with wonderful people, where people are always made to feel welcome and, as others have said, safe and secure.

Gary Kent would normally be here—it is rare to be at an event that has anything to do with Kurdistan and find he is not there—but I hope he does not mind me saying that he is on a pre-arranged family holiday in Madeira. He has still been emailing this week and I have spoken to him most days. He has been very helpful indeed and he epitomises what we are doing in the all-party parliamentary group for the Kurdistan region in Iraq in his running of the secretariat.

I thank hon. Members again and I thank you, Sir Henry, for your chairmanship.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered bilateral relations with the Kurdistan region in Iraq.

5.26 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Dangerous Dogs

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the Ninth Report of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, Controlling dangerous dogs, HC 1040, and the Government response, HC 1892.

It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir James. I accept—

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. I am most grateful.

Neil Parish: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. It always has been, and I hope today will be no different. I see we are completely packed out this afternoon, with standing room only. We are discussing a serious issue, and the fact that parties are discussing an important issue.

It is often said that the UK is a nation of dog lovers. As more than 9 million of us are dog owners, it is not hard to see why. Dogs are a huge source of love, comfort and companionship to so many of us. It is also good to see postal workers and others in the room. While we love our dogs, we have to remember that many workers have to come into or close to our homes, and we have to ensure that our dogs are under control. All those things need to be taken into consideration.

That love for our dogs is why it is so heartbreaking when relationships go wrong with dogs, when dogs are not treated with the care and compassion they deserve, and when they are not trained properly, or worse, when they are forced into aggressive and violent behaviour. Each year, thousands of dogs are seized under section 1 of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991. Hundreds are subsequently put down. That might once have been described as a price worth paying to save people from vicious dog attacks, but I was concerned to discover that since the Act was introduced, injury and fatality rates from dog attacks have increased, not gone down.

More than 200,000 people are attacked by dogs each year in England alone. Between 2005 and 2017, the number of recorded hospitalisations rose by some 81%, from 4,110 to 7,461. It is heartbreaking to look at the hospital data, which shows that children under nine are statistically the most at risk. Metropolitan police figures for 2015-16 indicate that legal breeds accounted for 80% of section 3 offences under the Act, which relate to dogs dangerously out of control. Sixty-seven people have died following dog attacks in the UK since 1991. The issue is not only dogs on the dangerous dogs list; many of the bites are from dogs not on that list. We have to consider that, however well intentioned the 1991 Act, it is not addressing the totality of the problem.

Section 3 of the 1991 Act makes it an offence for any dog to be dangerously out of control, regardless of its breed or type. That includes a dog injuring someone or an animal, a person believing that the dog would injure them, and a person believing that the dog would injure them if they tried to stop it attacking their dog or animal.

During our inquiry, we heard substantial debate about the effectiveness of this breed-specific legislation and the impact on dog welfare. According to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, 30 people died between 1991 and 2016 in dog-related incidents. The RSPCA told us that 21 of those dog-related incidents involved dogs of breeds not prohibited by law. One
person dying from a dog attack is one too many. The Government are responsible for protecting the public from dangerous animals, so it is essential that the laws evolve alongside our understanding of what works. We investigated whether the Government’s current approach is having the desired effect and whether any changes are needed to ensure that the public are properly protected and that animal welfare concerns are adequately addressed.

The Committee looked at the effectiveness of breed-specific legislation, and identified several areas for improvement to protect the public more effectively. One of the saddest consequences of the 1991 Act is that, when someone has to give up a section 1 dog, the law does not allow the dog owner to be changed; the dog can be transferred only if the owner dies or is incapacitated. If a section 1 dog strays or was abandoned and is being kept in a rescue centre, or if its owner cannot care for it due to a change in circumstances, it cannot be rehomed and is liable to be put down. The dog will also be destroyed if the owner is judged not to be a fit and proper person.

At Battersea dogs home, I saw a dog that had been brought in because its owner could no longer look after it. As far as I could tell, it was a very good-tempered dog, but because it could not be rehomed it had to be checked by the police to assess whether it was of a pit bull type. When the policeman saw the dog, he decided that it was of a pit bull type, and it was put down. I felt that that was one dog too many put down, because its temperament was good. I will talk a little more in a minute about how, with proper care and attention, such dogs can be placed with an owner who understands the type of dog, can handle it and complies with the regulations regarding taking it out in public.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I apologise for being unable to stay for the whole debate; I need to speak in the House. As the Committee inquiry highlighted, the prohibition on the transfer of dogs is utterly ludicrous. There was a very high profile case in Bristol on this matter. The dog can be transferred if the owner dies, but not if they move abroad because of work, as happened in one case, or if they lose their home and have to move into a flat where they are not allowed animals. It seems completely ludicrous that in some situations the dog then has to be destroyed when it might be, as the hon. Gentleman said, a perfectly well-behaved, acceptable dog.

Neil Parish: The hon. Lady is a very good member of the Committee, and I am delighted to see her this afternoon, even if only for a short while. She makes a really good point. We should look at the dog and its temperament. If the original owner could keep it, and take it out muzzled and on an all a leash in public, why can it not be rehomed? As she stated, such a dog can be rehomed if its owner dies, but not if it goes into a rescue centre either because it was left to stray or its owner could no longer look after it. I am sure that the Minister, being a very sympathetic and thoughtful man, will give that due consideration, because that is an anomaly. I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention.

This is an unfortunate situation, which is surely simple to resolve. The Government have the opportunity to improve the lives of these innocent animals. Our report called on the Government to avoid imposing an unnecessary death sentence on good-tempered animals. We therefore call on the Government to remove the ban on transferring section 1 dogs to new owners. That simple amendment could be accompanied by adequate checks and balances at animal rescue centres and appropriate safeguards to ensure that the rehoming of section 1 dogs is conducted responsibly and safely. They say, “It’s a dog’s life,” but in this case it really is. Good-natured dogs are being killed under section I of the 1991 Act. I understand that they have to be rehomed carefully, but if a dog can be rehomed after somebody dies, why can it not be rehomed when it has been brought in for other reasons? Two dogs could have the same temperament, but one would be destroyed and the other rehomed.

The Government’s response noted that “it would be irresponsible to amend the breed ban immediately without adequate safeguards” and stated that the prohibition “should remain in place for reasons of maintaining public safety.”

When we began looking at the matter, I originally thought that the Committee would call for the repeal of the breed-specific legislation. However, we fell short of that because, although 80% of dog bites and attacks come from dogs outside those specific breeds, the number of pit bull type dogs that bite is quite high given their total number. We therefore do need to have legislation in place regarding those dogs, but it has to be fairly administered.

What we want is for the legislation to be amended. Unfortunately, the Government told us that they do “not consider that it is a priority to amend legislation at this time.”

We understand that any change in the law would have to consider the implications for public safety, the potential increased burden on the courts, and the extra work for rescue and rehoming centres. The Committee was clear that any amendments to the legislation would need sensible safeguards to be put in place to protect the public. However, those are achievable goals. Too often in politics we are faced with what appear to be insurmountable problems—heaven knows we are at the moment—but this is not one of them. This problem can be sorted. A simple change to the law would ensure that a good-natured dog, such as the one that I saw, could be kept safely. I hope that the Minister will take the opportunity today to reconsider the Government’s position.

From looking at evidence against breed-specific legislation during our inquiry, the Committee was not convinced that there was enough independent evidence to justify the current approach to controlling dangerous dogs—something that we all want to see done more effectively. It was clear to us that, in order to do that, DEFRA needed more information. One of our key report recommendations was that “the Government should commission an independent review of the effectiveness of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 and wider dog control legislation. We expect this review to take account of the concerns and recommendations raised throughout this Report.”

Particular breeds are potentially very dangerous, but they account for only 20% of the bites and attacks. The Government need to review how we protect workers and others who enter homes where there may be other dogs that are potentially dangerous. Just sticking to the four breeds on the dangerous dogs list is not working.
Our second recommendation was:

“Defra should commission a comprehensive independent evidence review into the factors behind canine aggression, the determinants of risk, and whether the banned breeds pose an inherently greater threat... These results must then be used to inform the Government’s future dog control strategy.”

Any dog can bite, but the larger the dog, the more chance of the attack being a vicious one. Should we therefore ban every large dog that we come across? The answer is that of course we will not. In that case, do not just pick on particular breeds.

We were pleased that in their response to the Committee’s report the Government committed to commissioning research to review the effectiveness of current dog control measures. I do not know whether the Minister will be able to give a timescale for that. In November 2018, DEFRA commissioned Middlesex University to conduct research to assess the effectiveness of current dog control measures, and to identify and examine the causes of dog attacks, how to address dog behaviour problems, how policy might need to develop, and how to promote responsible dog ownership.

DEFRA committed to updating the Committee “later this year”—I wonder how late in 2019 that might be. I welcome the excellent news, but we cannot let the Government off the leash too quickly—sorry for that one. I ask the Minister to give us more details today about the review that he has commissioned of the dog control measures. What are its terms of reference, when will it be completed and who will be consulted? Will it examine whether the current Dangerous Dogs Act is fit for purpose?

There is much work to be done to create a truly fair system. I assure the Minister that the Committee will follow progress closely, and I promise that we will co-operate in any way to make the situation better. There needs to be more focus on the owner, not the breed. The destruction of a dog based purely on its breed is cruel and often unnecessary.

My second theme is trepidation. Although the Government’s response recognises the importance of improving the identification and control of dangerous dogs, they have so far lacked the confidence to take any decisive action. A degree of trepidation is understandable—some might even call it wise. It is always difficult when a dog is of good temperament but a potentially dangerous breed, because it might turn. When a dog turns after being allowed to live, there is always a big inquiry. I understand the trepidation and even have some sympathy for the Minister, but I still think that we need to take action.

No one wants to make the situation worse. The Metropolitan police told us that they would be open to a new approach to addressing dangerous dogs, but they stressed the importance of having a full system in place before any of the legislation is amended. Things are difficult for the police under the current legislation, because when they inspect a dog at Battersea, Blue Cross or any of the rescue centres that do good work, they have to decide whether it is of good temperament; if they say it is, but then it bites somebody, the responsibility will come back on them. That is why it is so important that the re-homing of these dogs be proper and thorough.

Our inquiry heard compelling evidence from the RSPCA and animal behaviourists, who argued that dogs should be judged by deed, not breed. The Government must do more to recognise in legislation the temperament of the dog. We also know that human safety is paramount, so we need effective dog control measures that focus on the deed, not the breed—I repeat that 80% of dog attacks are not carried out by any of the four dangerous dog breeds—and put reasonable safeguards in place for dogs that are judged to be dangerous. I emphasise that such measures need to address dangerous owners as effectively as they address dangerous dogs. Dogs are not born dangerous; they are made dangerous by not being cared for, and sometimes by actually being brutalised. Sometimes we do not recognise that enough.

That brings me to my final theme: education. A common theme throughout our inquiry was the need for a fundamental shift towards a more holistic approach to dog control that prioritises prevention through education, responsible ownership and early intervention. Witnesses from animal welfare charities felt that existing efforts fall short of what is required, and they called on the Government to develop a new approach—a call that our report echoes. It is clear to us from the evidence that human factors play a prominent role prior to the majority of dog attacks and that any systematic attempt to reduce the number of incidents needs to place a greater emphasis on education.

There are now charities that take dogs into schools, particularly primary schools. That should be encouraged, because some children do not have access to dogs and do not know how to handle them; they may approach them too quickly, grab their tail and ears or do things that they think are fine but that make the dog react badly. Unfortunately, there are some homes in which dogs are treated cruelly, but the charities that go into schools can make a real difference by showing children how dogs should be properly treated.

There is no requirement for schools to make use of the readily available materials on dog safety. That is a missed opportunity. Although education is not the Minister’s responsibility, I know that DEFRA works with the Department for Education and I think more could be done. Young children are at the greatest risk of dog attacks, and many suffer injuries that are horrific and in some cases avoidable. That is unacceptable, when education could help to prevent such life-changing injuries. I accept that we can never stop all dog bites, but we must do all we can to reduce the number of avoidable incidents. Teaching children how to stay safe around dogs is essential to that.

Our report further notes:

“A consistent approach is needed across the country to avoid the current post-code lottery of intervention.”

Naturally, resource implications differ among councils. Some councillors, of whichever political party, may feel that dealing with stray or potentially dangerous dogs is an essential part of a council’s work, while others may not feel the same. That inconsistency needs to be addressed.

Our witnesses told us that targeted initiatives to educate children on safe human-dog interactions are key. Some of them advocated adding such information to mandatory childhood education. The RSPCA said that having a Government policy would avoid the “piecemeal and sometimes duplicated approach” that is currently being delivered by the charitable sector across the country. Our report therefore calls on DEFRA to “commission a childhood education plan from experts and charities to determine the most effective education measures and how these could be implemented consistently across the country.”
We also concluded, based on the wide-ranging evidence we received, that DEFRA “should introduce a targeted awareness campaign to inform dog owners and the general public about responsible ownership and safe interactions.”

Most people who have dogs are good owners who know how to handle them, but there are some who choose to treat them badly. There are also some who, because of a lack of education, just do not have the ability to look after their dogs properly. Those are the people who need our help.

We recommend that DEFRA “should further develop proposals to help local enforcement bodies increase engagement among hard to reach demographics. This should involve a thorough assessment of the merits of mandatory third party liability insurance and training classes for dog owners.”

We were struck by the evidence that third-party insurance is not actually that expensive. It could certainly greatly help to compensate workers and others who are bitten. Responsible owners act responsibly. We need to reach out to those who are not responsible.

The Government’s response stated that they “will develop a plan of action with stakeholders on the most effective way to reach children across the country.”

I am aware that the new Minister is keen to bring sensible change in this area. I and the Committee will very much support his endeavours. Will he update us on the progress that the Department has made since January? The sooner we teach children how to be safe with dogs, the better. We could save a life. We could save many lives. It is worth taking action.

With young children at risk of serious injury, Ministers should support wider dog awareness training for schoolchildren. The report recommended a targeted awareness campaign for dog owners and the general public on dog safety. New dog control legislation should be introduced to consolidate the existing patchwork of legislation, with dedicated dog control notices to allow for early intervention in incidents. All dogs can be dangerous, and we cannot ban all dogs that might one day bite someone, but we can take every sensible step to ensure that the law and Government policy is fit for purpose and effective. That means recognising the threat and dealing with it comprehensively.

The Government’s current strategy for tackling dangerous dogs is well intentioned, but in some cases misguided. I hope that the Minister will reflect on that and that DEFRA’s policy will be revised so that it is truly fit for purpose. I hope to meet the Minister and charities to facilitate a way forward, and to look at ways that a dog can be rehomed when the owner can no longer look after it. I do not want to hound the Minister, but we really need to see some action.

2.2 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure and privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I have two points to declare—they are not declarations of interest, but they are points of relevance. I have been the owner of two dogs, which came to me as a pair, inherited from a friend and constituent who died. One dog, whose name is Tweed, is a bull terrier cross—a rescue dog found wandering in the streets of Weeton in Lancashire, and taken to an animal shelter, where my constituent and her husband fell in love with her and took her home.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) and the Committee on such a comprehensive set of proposals and summary of how they came to them. The proposals are quite specific. The report, published on 17 October, spurred me to ask the Prime Minister 10 days later what the Government’s response was going to be. Having said to the Prime Minister that I was going to give her some brief relief from Brexit to talk about dogs instead, I said:

“Last week, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee said that the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, with its specific breeds definition, was not fit for purpose, as hundreds of pit bull-type dogs are confiscated yearly and destroyed, with no impact on dog bite numbers. Will she ask the Secretary of State...to act urgently on the Committee’s recommendations and not take the approach of the Lords Minister, who told the Committee that even a good-tempered dog had to be put down as ‘collateral damage’? My wonderful bull terrier-type dog was rescued from the streets, and to think of her being destroyed because her face did not fit in court is chilling.”

The Prime Minister was positive in her response:

“I had not looked at the detail of the Select Committee report on that particular issue, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the Secretary of State is a keen dog owner, as indeed is the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who is sitting next to me, and that the Secretary of State will be looking at this issue very carefully.”


I come to the debate today to ask the Minister what the Secretary of State has done to fulfil the Prime Minister’s assurance to me last October, and to make some observations on what has happened since.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton has drawn attention to the need for checks and balances and to the difficulties involved in any Government dealing with this broad range of issues. I want to be positive about one or two parts of the Government’s response, such as the approval for the need for a central database for dog bites and the speeding up of court cases, and their general support for and assurance with respect to the principles of education. However, as the hon. Gentleman said, that is for other Departments, and as a shadow Education Minister, I might be able to take it up with the Department for Education myself.

What I found distressing, disheartening and difficult to understand was why, having heard all the information, the response was so negative in this particular area. I place a great deal of store by what Select Committees do—I declare another interest: I was on several of them, for about 10 years. As the hon. Gentleman said, most of the time they are very cohesive and collaborative, and they and the Government should work on the basis of evidence-driven policy. Unfortunately, in this Government response, that approach seems to be notably lacking.

It is slightly beyond belief that nowhere in the response did the Government address the issues of consultation. That is what the Committee was asking for. I can well imagine the “Yes Minister”-style conversations that might have gone on in the Department: “We do not want to address the substantial evidence in the Committee’s report. Minister, that shows mission creep, which sometimes condemns a wide range of pit bull dogs in this area. Minister, we have a perfectly reasonable argument—there are so many other things to think about in the context
of Brexit—so why do we not just try to ride it out, with the usual excuses about it not being a priority or not having enough legislative time?” Perhaps that is why that is exactly what they did.

On page 7, paragraph 22, on the very modest proposal by the Committee

“We were concerned to hear that the Government considered the Dangerous Dogs Act to be successful on the grounds that it was impossible to tell how many attacks would have occurred without the law. This is not convincing... The increase in attacks—most of them from legal breeds—clearly indicates that the current approach is failing to protect the public adequately.”

The hon. Gentleman supplemented his concerns about the welfare of dogs with his concerns about the welfare of humans. This is not just an un evidenced and disproportionate application in the Act; it is missing some of the main points that are necessary to give the public confidence. That is why the Committee asked for the independent review of the Act’s effectiveness, which the Department has studiously ignored. It is also why the comments in the report came down rather hard on the Department. The Committee stated:

“We are concerned that Defra’s arguments in favour of maintaining Breed Specific Legislation are not substantiated by robust evidence. It is even more worrying that non-existent evidence appears to have been cited before a Parliamentary Committee in support of current Government policy. This lack of clarity indicates a disturbing disregard for evidence-based policy-making.”

It goes on to talk about the independent review.

I said that there were aspects of the Government’s evidence that were chilling, and I want to quote one of them. It might be the same one that the hon. Gentleman, who chairs the Select Committee, referred to earlier—the case of the Battersea dog that was put down. On this occasion, after the Committee had heard evidence of how difficult it is to classify or identify pit bulls genetically, and that seizure could sweep up other dogs simply on the basis of appearance, the Chair of the Committee said:

“To get to the point about the Battersea dog that was put down, as far as you are concerned, that is just collateral damage. It was a pit bull type and it may have been good-tempered, but as far as you are concerned, just put it down. Is that where you are?”

Lord Gardiner, the Minister in the Lords, replied, “Yes.” So, it is not surprising that 80,000 people have signed a petition to this House—hopefully for the removal, but certainly for the examination, of what seems to be an extraordinarily defective part of the law.

The hon. Gentleman made the point that, when changing the law, Governments have to be very careful about unintended consequences and so on. However, it is worth remembering the climate that brought about the Dangerous Dogs Act. I will not go into the details, but in my view this is a perfect illustration of hard cases making bad law.

There is a way out for the Minister to rid himself of the incubus of complacency and callousness that he has been lumbered with in trying to defend the shameful response from his Department to the Select Committee’s measured and humane representations. The Department’s response largely ducks the Select Committee’s call for an independent evidence review on the factors behind canine aggression, because that would mean admitting the inadequacies in the evidence base for the original Act.

The defence given in the Select Committee’s report included a reference—the hon. Gentleman has referred to it—to the Middlesex University research that has been commissioned by the Department. Why not use this commission, which has already been set up, to widen the terms of reference for that research and review the adequacy of the breed-determinant evidence that justified four types of dog being included in the Act in the first place? That would cut the Gordian knot the Department has tied itself up in. Why not give a deadline
before the end of the year for there to be some answers to what the Select Committee is asking? If the Minister and his Department need a face-saving mechanism and a deadline, let this be it. That would be far better than continuing the evidence-poor status quo on breed determination, which has condemned thousands of dogs in those categories for 30 years, and which the Select Committee’s report shines such a poignant light on.

This issue has aroused strong passions and it affects many personally. One of my constituents, Helen Harris, supports an end to breed-specific legislation. In an email sent to me on 1 March, she gives her perspective on what she saw when the Act was introduced:

“I worked in a pet shop in 1991 and we had quite a few customers with pitbulls and I remember the devastation this law caused. We allowed people to bring dogs into the shop and every pitbull I met was friendly and happy. Once the law came in and the dogs were no longer allowed off the lead in public places and had to wear a muzzle the dogs noticeably changed. I did not live with these dogs and only saw them when they were brought into the shop but they all went from calm happy dogs to very unhappy dogs in a few weeks, some of them were very hyperactive because of the decrease in exercise. They had done nothing wrong and did not know why they were being punished. Breed specific law is not working.”

I understand that that has to be weighed up against all the other issues, but this issue will not go away. Dogs might have been man’s best friend, but man has not always been dog’s best friend. In this case, the Department has certainly not been dogs’ best friend. It is crucial for us to reduce the terrible toll meted out to children and adults year after year, to which the hon. Gentleman referred, but this is actually being aided and abetted by the misidentification of the causes of this particular position.

We are taking about statistics, but we should be talking about individual animals. Blue Cross cited the case study of a section 1 dog called Duncan:

“Duncan was brought to us as an injured stray. Unfortunately the Status Dogs Unit (SDU) confirmed he was of type and would have to be euthanised after serving his stray days. Staff who dealt with Duncan described him as a gentle giant who was very well behaved. He knew basic commands and had he been another type of dog, he could have made a great companion to someone. Duncan was put to sleep at our central London hospital after the mandatory period of seven days, during which no owner came forward.”

That should lie heavily on the Department’s conscience; the Minister should consider it.

My dog Tweed was fortunate, as she was picked up from the animal shelter within seven days. Duncan was not. Perhaps we need a Duncan’s law to rectify some of the problems and injustices that this excellent Select Committee report has highlighted.

2.20 pm

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I am sure that hon. Members will remember that last July we had a similar debate in this Chamber, on breed-specific legislation and Staffies. Many of the concerns that have been discussed today were raised then. Following that debate, I am pleased to see such an excellent report from the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. I thank its Chair, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), for clearly outlining the report and the Committee’s concerns about the current legislation.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) for making such an important contribution and for making some interesting suggestions to the Department about how we can move the situation forward.

There are two main issues in the report that we must address. The first relates to public health. The Government’s current approach to dog control is failing to protect people adequately. The second relates to animal welfare. Too many harmless dogs are being destroyed simply because they are a banned breed—because of what they look like—regardless of their temperament. There can be no denying that, since the Dangerous Dogs Act came into force nearly three decades ago, more people have been killed by dog attacks, and more people are being admitted to hospital due to dog bites. I have spoken to the Communication Workers Union, and I understand that about 3,000 postal workers are attacked by dogs every year. The union has very much welcomed the Committee’s report.

The hon. Members who have spoken have given examples of dogs that have been put down when they were in rescue centres. Last year I launched the Labour party’s animal welfare plan. When I visited the RSPCA’s Harmsworth animal hospital, I met Bailey—a really lovely dog who could definitely have been rehomed to the right owner. I actually asked whether I could take him home myself, because I could not bear the thought that that beautiful dog was going to be put down, but sadly that could not happen because he had been typed. Tragically, he was put to sleep the week after my visit. I personally find that very hard.

We had a consultation after we launched our animal welfare plan, and we had a huge response to it. Many of the responses referred to breed-specific legislation, which we had not actually put in the plan. Dog owners and rescue centres asked us to consider looking at the issue in any future policy documents that we put out on animal welfare.

We must be a lot more pragmatic when it comes to banning certain dogs based just on their breed. As the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton said, we must recognise that all dogs can bite. Any dog can be dangerous in the wrong hands, regardless of breed or type, or the fact that they look a certain way. Any action to tackle dog bites, and all other instances of canine aggression, as the hon. Gentleman said, must focus on the deed, not the breed.

The RSPCA told the Select Committee that it believes that breed-specific legislation is ineffective in protecting public safety, and results in the suffering and euthanasia of many dogs unnecessarily. It believes that breed-specific legislation should be repealed, and that issues surrounding human safety should be tackled using education and effective legislative measures that do not unnecessarily compromise dog welfare. The RSPCA told me that in recent years, in order to comply with the legislation, it has euthanised hundreds of dogs. We have heard that many other rescue centres have had to do the same. Many of those dogs, like Bailey, would have been suitable for rehoming.

DEFRA’s figures show that no dogs on the index of exempted dogs have actually been involved in an attack. As the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North East (Kerry McCarthy) said, this is not working. Why are we putting down healthy, innocent dogs from rescue centres simply because they are a particular breed when we have no evidence to prove that
there is a problem? We must look at the reform of dog control legislation. We should introduce education to ensure that high-risk behaviour towards dogs is avoided. All severe and fatal dog bites must be properly investigated. I visited Battersea dogs and cats home and, like the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton, saw a beautiful dog that the home said was perfectly able to be rehomed, waiting for the people to come to take it away to be euthanised. Battersea said very strongly to me that the Dangerous Dogs Act is completely ineffective at protecting the public. It is arguing for the abolition or reform of BSL, and has called it a sticking plaster that does not prevent harm. It wants the Government to amend the legislation to ensure that dogs are not put down simply because of the way they look.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South said, the current law is not supported by scientific evidence. The Select Committee criticised the Government about that, stating that their lack of clarity when it comes to robust evidence “indicates a disturbing disregard for evidence-based policy making”. I think that is extremely worrying.

It is absolutely right that we have proper engagement processes and education in place to help the public understand dog behaviour and responsible ownership much better. The Chair of the Select Committee talked about getting people into primary schools to teach children about how to behave with and understand dogs. That is incredibly important.

I have a dog—my family has always had dogs—so I know at first hand that being a pet owner is terribly rewarding but a huge responsibility. Anybody taking on a pet needs to recognise that. The dogs that I have had have always been large dogs, from Irish wolfhounds to Dalmatians, and I currently have a Labrador. It is really important to train and socialise big dogs properly, because in the wrong hands every dog has the potential to injure either people or other animals. We must focus on ownership, rather than on the type of dog.

Prevention through education, responsible ownership and early intervention is clearly a better, more holistic approach than slapping a blanket ban on certain dog breeds and saying that that is the way to protect the public. As the rising figures show, it is not. Evidence presented to the inquiry shows that human factors play a prominent role in many dog attacks, so we must ensure that dogs have responsible owners.

I want to talk briefly about livestock worrying, which the Committee’s report touches on. This is an issue about which the National Farmers Union, and farmers generally, are very concerned. It is a particular problem in my constituency in Cumbria. It is thought that, in 2016, 15,000 sheep were killed in livestock attacks. The cost to the farming sector is about £1.6 million a year. Sheep worrying can have a devastating impact on small hill farmers, such as those in my constituency. Responsible ownership is critical. Livestock worrying often happens because a dog has escaped or because the owners simply do not believe that their dog will be dangerous when it is around sheep. People say, “My dog is a Labrador; it is not going to do any damage.”

Neil Parish: I thank the shadow Minister for talking about sheep worrying. Many members of the general public do not always understand that the dog does not actually need to be dangerous; it just needs to run through the sheep. The sheep will run from it and very often wind up in a ditch. The sheep might be heavily in lamb. If there are several dogs together, they actually believe that they are playing half the time, and although they may not actually be vicious, they still have a hugely detrimental effect on that flock of sheep.

Sue Hayman: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. In an area such as Cumbria, where I live, many visitors are perhaps not used to being with their dogs in the countryside and around sheep. The education aspect of the issue is absolutely critical, because I do not think that those people appreciate the damage that can be done simply by allowing a dog to run amok among a flock of sheep. We really need to raise awareness of the issue and look at how we can tackle it. I know that the all-party parliamentary group on animal welfare produced an excellent report last year on livestock worrying, and I ask the Minister to look at it and consider its recommendations on how to tackle the problem.

The Select Committee’s report is very clear in its recommendation that changing the law is widely desirable but also achievable, and that it will protect the public much better than the status quo. Let us get the legislation right in order to protect both the public and dogs. We need the right education in place, and we need to focus on how we can tackle irresponsible dog owners, not just the dogs. I look forward to the Minister’s response. I hope that he has paid close attention to the recommendations of this excellent report. It would be good if we could finally start to move the issue forward.

2.31 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Gray. I am grateful to the Liaison Committee for determining as the subject of the debate the EFRA Committee’s report on controlling dangerous dogs and the Government response to it. I am also grateful for the thoughtful and considered contributions that have been made in this debate, which although not one of quantity, has certainly been one of quality. I know that those contributions have been made with conviction, first-hand experience and considerable passion, not least that of my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), which is characteristic of him.

I will provide some information on the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 and the Government’s position on breed-specific legislation. The 1991 Act does two things: it provides offences in connection with fighting dogs and offences in connection with dog attacks on people and other animals. Section 1 prohibits four types of fighting dogs: pit bull terriers, Japanese tosa, Fila Brasileiro and Dogo Argentino. Pit bulls have been associated with a number of serious attacks on people and it was decided that action should be taken against their ownership. Fundamentally, the 1991 Act is about public safety. Under that Act, it is an offence to breed from, sell or exchange those dogs. Courts can allow owners to keep prohibited dogs if they are not a danger to public safety, taking account of the dog’s temperament and of the intended keeper, who must have had substantial prior responsibility for the dog.
Neil Parish: The Minister is addressing the crux of the matter. When courts deal with dangerous dogs that have owners, they look at the temperament of the dog and say, “That dog can be kept by the owner as long as it is properly muzzled, leashed and handled.” The problem occurs when the same type of dog, with the same temperament, turns up in a rehoming centre that can no longer look after it. It has to be checked, but nobody will actually take the case to court, meaning that the dog will potentially be destroyed. That is exactly the type of dog that could be saved if it still had an owner. Instead, it is put down because it has gone into a rehoming centre. That is the real problem.

David Rutley: I thank my hon. Friend for clarifying. He spelled that out very well in his speech and, with his permission, I will come to that specific point later, but I think it is important to set the context before getting into the meat of the issues that have been raised.

Prohibited dogs that owners are allowed to keep are placed on the index of exempted dogs, which is managed by DEFRA. In addition to restrictions on certain fighting dogs, under section 3 of the 1991 Act it is an offence to allow any dog to be dangerously out of control in any place. Severe penalties are in place for allowing a dog to be dangerously out of control. Those penalties were increased in 2014 to three years for allowing a dog to attack an assistance dog, five years if a dog injures someone and 14 years if someone is killed. We realised from the tragic cases that we had seen that the sentences needed to be more in line with the crimes committed.

Both my hon. Friends and the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) were absolutely right to raise the issue of postal workers. We need to get the balance right between public safety and animal welfare. The number of attacks on postal workers is absolutely to be regretted. It is unacceptable that people are unable to go about their business because of fear or actual attacks. We therefore work closely with police and local authorities to see how we can best respond to those attacks. I am sure that many MPs have worked with their local postal workers at Christmas or at other times of the year to better understand those situations and to make representations.

The Government are committed to public safety and to tackling the issue of dangerous dogs. We believe that communication and co-operation between the police and local authorities is vital. That is why we have endorsed initiatives such as the early intervention and partnership working scheme, Local Environmental Awareness on Dogs, or LEAD—that is not one of my hon. Friend’s puns, but the name of the scheme.

The scheme encourages police and local authorities to co-operate and share information when there has been a minor incident, provide advice to a dog owner on dog control issues, improve public safety around dogs and help to improve dog welfare. There have been strong endorsements of the initiative. The then deputy chief constable of North Wales police and recently retired National Police Chiefs’ Council lead on dangerous dogs, Gareth Pritchard, said:

“Problems regarding dogs can cause a great deal of anxiety in some communities. The new LEAD initiative aims to allay some of those fears to help educate dog owners and residents further by promoting responsible dog ownership.”

The Government also support an increase in awareness at all levels across society. We are aware, for example, that many police forces and welfare charities, such as the Dogs Trust, visit schools to raise awareness of responsible dog ownership. We fully endorse that work and I will come to how we will do more on the back of the EFRA Committee’s excellent report. I want to make it clear that the Government are keen to tackle irresponsible dog ownership. As I have explained, a number of changes were made to the laws and powers available to enforcement agencies in an attempt to improve responsible ownership of dogs. The Government acknowledge that the number of people admitted to hospital as a result of being bitten by a dog has risen from 6,836 in 2013-14 to 8,014 in 2017-18.

A number of concerns have been raised about whether it is fair to put particular focus on pit bulls, but as a nation we are not alone in doing so: France, Spain and Germany have also put restrictions on keeping a number of types of dog, including pit bulls. It is also worth looking at some of the evidence that I have seen and that has been submitted to my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton in his capacity as Chair of the Select Committee, about section 3 incidents—the particularly difficult ones—involving pit bulls. There were 92 such cases in 2015-16, and those pit bulls were not on the dangerous dogs index. In comparison, there were 84 attacks by Staffordshire bull terriers.

We could say, “Well, there is not much difference,” but I think we would all accept that the number of Staffordshire bull terriers in the UK is sizeable—around 300,000, according to the latest estimates—whereas, although we do not know the exact number of pit bulls, there are about 3,000 on the DDI. We probably need to get more evidence, but the evidence that is to hand points to the fact that there is a greater likelihood of incidents involving pit bulls.

Gordon Marsden: That is what the Department says, but is it not ludicrous that it does not openly address the issue—it is an issue, and one that was put forcefully to the Committee—that it is very difficult for police on the ground to determine genetically what is a pit bull and what is not? The Minister spoke about Staffordshire bull terriers. What is the logic for having an investigation into attacks by pit bulls, which are covered by the Act—albeit many of us dispute that—and not into attacks by Staffordshire bull terriers?

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. Interventions should be brief.

Gordon Marsden: If the Minister looks only at the issue of the breeds in the 1991 Act, he will of course come to the same conclusion, because he is not examining the broader evidence.

David Rutley: I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman makes. When I appeared before the Select Committee, I said that we should remember that the Dangerous Dogs Act is trying to deal with two things: fighting types, which are bred specifically to fight, and dangerous dogs. That is my worry. The hon. Gentleman might have had cases of this in his constituency and, as I said at the meeting, I certainly did in Macclesfield, where a few years ago pit bulls were being trained to hang from tree branches. That is not what most people do with a normal dog. Certain types of dog are bred for...
a specific purpose, and that needs to be tackled, because there are people who carry out that practice, which I abhor. Dog fighting is a separate issue, and we could have a separate debate on it. The legislation tries to recognise both those aspects. I understand his point, but I hope that he understands at least that there are differences in why dogs are being bred. As long as dog fighting goes on, there will be such challenges.

We understand the concern about dog control and the need to reduce the number of dog attacks. People are of course not the only victims of dog attacks; other dogs and animals can be the victims of such attacks. Dog attacks on livestock have caused suffering to animals and misery for farmers, and we want to reduce all such attacks and to improve responsible ownership of dogs. That point was made well by the hon. Member for Workington and my hon. Friend the Member for Tytherington, which is in my constituency—I do not want to see healthy and well-adjusted dogs being put to sleep. For the reasons I have set out, however, we are subject to what is legally possible. Recent case law has interpreted the legislation, so the court may decide to give possession of a pit bull to a person who has had some contact with it, such as taking the dog for a walk. Ultimately, the courts will make the decision on whether the dog is safe, and the prospective person is fit and proper.

The difficulty is putting a stray dog that has no owner with a person the dog has not met before the court case. That is not feasible under the law. We continue to discuss with stakeholders what can be done, and we will involve my hon. Friend in those discussions, as I promised following my recent evidence to the Committee. We are happy to meet him and relevant welfare groups for further discussion and greater clarity. It is a tricky area, but the case law needs to be explored fully. I hope that my hon. Friend will accept the invitation to meet as soon as possible. He knows that I want us to do all we can to address the concerns that he has expressed.

In the course of the debate, a number of specific issues were raised. If the owner of a dog dies, it can be transferred under article 12 of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991. If an owner moves and abandons a dog, it can be rehomed to a person who can be considered the person in charge of that dog for the time being—but remember that abandoning a dog is in the first place a criminal act. If someone got to know the dog before the owner moved—this is important, with an educational aspect—that person could apply to be the person in charge of the dog, and the new person would need to be considered fit and proper by the court. There are opportunities therefore for such dogs to be rehomed. We need to look through all such opportunities.

The hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) asked why we are not recommending a change in the law. That would require primary legislation and, as I said, there are concerns about public safety. We need to explore the issues that we have just discussed. However, I point out that while there may be disagreement on that issue, the Government are absolutely committed to the welfare of dogs and cats: we have looked to increase sentences for animal cruelty, and are trying to find the right legislative vehicle to do so quickly; third-party sale has been banned; and we are reviewing our approach to the licensing of rehoming centres. All those issues are being taken forward with conviction.

Continuing the theme of preventive action, the EFRA Committee recommended more research on the causes of dog attacks. In December 2018, therefore, DEFRA in collaboration with Middlesex University commissioned further research into responsible ownership across all dog breeds, with a budget of more than £70,000. Middlesex has five main researchers to consider different approaches and the effectiveness of existing dog control measures.

The research seeks to identify and examine factors and situations that might cause dog attacks, and how to promote responsible dog ownership. The initial stage of the project, which is a literature review, is nearly complete. I will take this opportunity to update hon. Members on the Government’s progress with some of the recommendations. Rehoming of pit bull dogs is an emotive and difficult issue. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Tytherington, which is in my constituency—I do not want to see healthy and well-adjusted dogs being put to sleep. For the reasons I have set out, however, we are subject to what is legally possible. Recent case law has interpreted the legislation, so the court may decide to give possession of a pit bull to a person who has had some contact with it, such as taking the dog for a walk. Ultimately, the courts will make the decision on whether the dog is safe, and the prospective person is fit and proper.

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Middlesex has started initial stakeholder engagement to inform a number of focus groups, which is the next phase. We expect an interim report at the beginning of September, with a final report at the end of the year. I hope that reassures my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton. The project, as I said, will include a review of dog control measures.

Related to that research is the need to educate children in particular, and the public more widely, about safety around dogs. The Government are committed to developing a plan of action with stakeholders on the most effective way to reach children across the country, in order to make them aware of dog safety. We have had early discussions with stakeholders and are developing the delivery plan, which is due later this year. We are working with the Department for Education, and are keen to ensure that that links with our wider work on communications and engagement about how to take forward responsible ownership and purchasing of dogs, and education regarding them.

Hon. Members can be assured that the Government will continue to take forward the actions I set out in response to the EFRA Committee with speed and conviction. I am grateful to the Liaison Committee for bringing this debate forward and giving me the opportunity to set out the Government's position and proposals.

2.50 pm

Neil Parish: I thank all Members who have spoken. I thank the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) for his thoughtful contribution and support for the report, as well as the hon. Members for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and for Workington (Sue Hayman). From the tone of the speeches, it is apparent that there is cross-party support for some change to the Dangerous Dogs Act. I thank the Minister for his very humane response, because this is a humane issue.

In the Select Committee we have tried not to be too demanding. We perhaps started out wanting to repeal the Act entirely, but did not end up with that conclusion. I restate that similar dogs to those that go to rehoming centres and are put down because they cannot be rehomed are allowed to be kept, under licence, by the original owners. Blue Cross, Dogs Trust, Battersea dogs home and the RSPCA need to be confident that there is a system that allows them legally to rehome that dog. That is why I look forward to meeting the Minister and officials to try to get a legal basis for that.

I do not think the Government are necessarily hiding behind breed-specific legislation, but those four particular breeds, mainly pit bulls, account for 20% of attacks. The other 80% are by other dogs. Therefore it is about education, management of dogs, responsible dog ownership and getting to those sectors of society that create dangerous dogs. They may not be pit bull types, because it is the way they are treated that makes them dangerous.

There is a lot of work to be done, because we do not want more postal workers to be attacked or for the number of dog bites to keep going up as they have. Again, I thank the Minister for his engagement. The Select Committee, the Opposition and the Government can make the law work much better, and I hope that fewer dogs of good temperament will be put down in future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Ninth Report of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, Controlling dangerous dogs, HC 1040, and the Government response, HC 1892.

2.53 pm

Sitting suspended.
3 pm

**Ellie Reeves** (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the cost and effectiveness of sentences under 12 months and consequences for the prison population.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for this debate, which follows several others with a similar theme in the past few weeks, including a debate on the effectiveness of short sentences led by my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans), and one on the recall of women prisoners led by my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris). That shows the appetite across the House for discussing these important issues.

As a member of the Select Committee on Justice, I am proud of our “Transforming Rehabilitation” report, which was published last summer and included a recommendation that the Government should introduce a presumption against short sentences. I welcome the recent news that the Secretary of State wishes the Government to move away from the short sentencing model, but although the policy direction of the Ministry of Justice seems centred on sentences of six months or less, I believe we should consider the costs and consequences of sentences of up to 12 months, and enshrine a presumption against them in law.

In 2017, more than 37,000 people entered prison to serve a sentence of less than 12 months. The short time available often means there is little opportunity adequately to address the needs of that population, with limited access to offending behaviour programmes, education and work. Research by the Revolving Doors Agency showed that nearly half of all people sent to prison are sent there for less than six months, and that the overwhelming majority are imprisoned for non-violent offences.

I do not dispute that offenders who have committed serious or violent crimes, or those who pose a risk to society, should often be given a custodial sentence, but four out of every five people sent to prison last year had committed a non-violent crime. Most reasonable people expect jail terms to deliver rehabilitation for offenders and a clear means to reduce reoffending, as well as punishment.

**Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for that important point. I beg to move.

Ellie Reeves: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about escalation to prison sentences instead of increased use of community sentences. Community sentences have halved in the past decade. Again, I will talk a little more about that, because it is really important that we have robust and effective community sentences, and that sentences have the confidence to hand those sentences out.

The Secretary of State has admitted that shorter sentences do not work. The Ministry’s data shows that adults released from custodial sentences of less than 12 months had a reoffending rate of 64%, compared with the overall rate of 29%, yet it has been shown that offenders serving a community sentence typically have a reoffending rate seven percentage points lower than similar people serving prison sentences of less than a year. Those with suspended sentence orders have a reoffending rate nine percentage points lower. The emphasis needs to be on better rehabilitation in the community.

It is clear from the issuing of four urgent notifications on squalid prisons and countless news reports about failing standards that the prison system is failing offenders and the public. It is uncomfortable to view the Ministry’s data shows that adults released from custodial sentences of less than 12 months had a reoffending rate of 64%, compared with the overall rate of 29%, yet it has been shown that offenders serving a community sentence typically have a reoffending rate seven percentage points lower than similar people serving prison sentences of less than a year. Those with suspended sentence orders have a reoffending rate nine percentage points lower. The emphasis needs to be on better rehabilitation in the community.

Like a lot of the prison estate, HMP Durham is a Victorian building in need of repair, where prisoners are kept in rooms that are failing apart, and often unclean, and are provided with little stimulating activity or purposeful rehabilitation. Sadly, HMP Durham is not alone. A year ago, I visited HMP Rochester with the Justice Committee. That Victorian prison is not fit for purpose.

More recently, we visited HMP Birmingham—a prison so bad that the private contractor, G4S, had to hand back control to Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service. The recent inspections at HMPs Nottingham, Wormwood Scrubs, Wandsworth and Bedford all showed that problems with safety and overcrowding are particularly acute at local prisons, where large numbers of people are often held for short periods. A reduction in the use of short prison sentences could significantly reduce...
We need meaningful community sentences, far more robust than the CRC-monitored rehabilitation that we have at the moment where offenders too often just have supervision on the telephone rather than face to face, and missed appointments go unchecked. The Government make the right noises, but clear action is required. As the Prison Reform Trust’s latest Bromley briefing succinctly states:

“Short prison sentences are less effective than community sentences at reducing reoffending. Yet, the use of community sentences has more than halved in only a decade”, falling from 193,000 to 91,000 over a decade.

The Ministry of Justice’s own research has shown that community sentences are particularly effective for people who have committed a large number of previous offences and for those with mental health problems. For those with more than 50 previous offences, the odds of reoffending are more than a third higher when a short prison sentence is used rather than a community sentence. Another piece of research by the Ministry of Justice, published in 2017, found that providing treatment for drug and alcohol addictions in the community has also been shown to reduce reoffending. More than two fifths did not reoffend and there was a 33% reduction in the number of offences committed in the two years following treatment. As much as the instinct is to think that repeat offending must mean harsher sentences, that is not what the evidence suggests we should do. Policy must be evidence-led if we are to expect results, and the current approach is too costly and too ineffective to continue following the short sentencing model.

There is the question of the cost of the failures around short custodial sentences not only to prisons and wider Ministry of Justice budgets, but to other Departments and society as a whole. Short sentences can see prisoners lose their homes, their jobs and their family ties. Combined with the failure of the through-the-gate initiative, the impact and effect of prison last much longer than any original custodial sentence.

To be given a custodial sentence is one thing, but to have all the means to reduce the propensity to reoffend and to get back on with life removed in the short time that someone is in prison is quite another, and it has far longer and wider-ranging consequences than the original sentence. One of the most fundamental issues is that of housing. The link between rough sleeping and prison leavers is deeply concerning, and short sentencing does nothing but exacerbate the issue. The latest figures from the Combined Homelessness and Information Network show that 36% of rough sleepers in London have been in prison—up 3% on last year.

Colleagues have also repeatedly raised concerns and frustrations with Friday releases from prisons as prisoners are unable to contact housing providers until Monday morning or get a prescription to deal with an addiction. If someone does not have a place to stay, it is far harder to register with the council or a jobcentre, and offenders are more likely to end up sleeping rough. The most vulnerable might simply immediately return to crime.

The issue is summarised perfectly by a case study from the social justice charity, Nacro:

“C was released on a Friday after serving a 4 week sentence with a history of homelessness. Given the short amount of time spent in custody, it was not enough time for us to source stable housing for him on release. C had to present at the local authority to make a homelessness application and was told to come back the next week for an appointment. C slept rough that weekend.”
Short sentences do not work. They very often increase rather than decrease reoffending rates. They can tear families apart and put pressure on a crumbling prison system with very little benefit. They have failed. The Government have been making the right noises, but I hope they will now follow in the direction of Scotland and seek to enshrine in law a presumption against short sentences of 12 months or less, backed up with robust, effective and properly funded community sentences.

3.15 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) on securing the debate, and I extend my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee. She also had the support of the Justice Committee. The debate stems from our “Prison Population 2022” inquiry, which looks at the make-up of the current prison population and how it might develop in future. We also produced a report on transforming rehabilitation. I am glad to see the Minister in his place. I appreciate his evidence in relation to our two inquiries. It is also good to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain).

I very much agree with the thrust of what the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge said. Our reports were cross-party and both were unanimous. There is a growing recognition in the House that we need to revise our approach to some aspects of sentencing policy and the way in which we use imprisonment. I am fortified by the nearly 30 years I spent in the criminal justice system as a practising barrister before coming here. I prosecuted as much as I defended. I therefore had a hand in convicting people who sometimes went to prison for long periods of time—deservedly so—and sometimes people who went to prison for short periods. I also defended people who sometimes went to prison for long periods, having been convicted after due process, and deservedly so, and also people who sometimes went to prison for short periods.

I defended and prosecuted people who were sometimes fundamentally dangerous, and in a few instances really quite evil, but in very many instances people who were foolish and had made a series of chaotic and disastrous mistakes in their lives. Some were greedy, some were naive and some were easily led. There was a mixture of reasons. Some needed to be kept out of circulation for some time, but they were a minority. The vast majority were going to have to return to society at some point once they had served their sentence. Regrettably, we have a system that does not do all that it could to make sure that those people change their lives when they get back into the community.

I see our proposals and those put forward by the Secretary of State, which I warmly support, to look again at the way in which we use shorter custodial sentences as absolutely not going soft on crime—quite the reverse. Preventing reoffending is the best possible way of reducing the number of victims. The less reoffending, the fewer victims there are likely to be. That is a desirable state of affairs.

There is a place for punishment in our justice system. People who break the rules against society have to be brought up sharp and must recognise that it is not acceptable. However, the punishment has to be constructive as well as condign. That is why we need to make sure there is room in our prisons for those who have committed serious offences for which prison is the only appropriate penalty. That will always be the case, but there are many for whom that is not the most appropriate and constructive way forward. We need to be more up front about recognising that.

The debate has a focus on cost-effectiveness. That is worth mentioning because, as well as having a background as a criminal justice practitioner, I am also influenced by being a Conservative and believing in the good use of taxpayers’ money. The way we currently deal with people going through the prison system, particularly in relation to shorter sentences, is not a good use of taxpayers’ money, for the reasons that have been set out.

It is exceedingly expensive to keep people in custody. Sometimes it must happen, with the public policy justification of protection of the public and prevention of crime. However, there are other proper purposes of imprisonment; not just punishment, deterrence and public protection. A recognised purpose of sentencing—I hope that in due course it will be enshrined in statute as a purpose of imprisonment—is reform and rehabilitation. The vast majority of people whom I dealt with were not beyond reformation or rehabilitation, and I think that is true of human society as a whole. However, we do not carry it out effectively, for the reasons that have been set out, and we spend significant amounts of public money.

The consequence is high rates of reoffending, which hurts the economy.

As to the social and economic cost of crime, the total cost is about £59 billion. I think that, broadly, the cost attributed specifically to reoffending is about £15 billion to £18 billion. That is the economic cost. There is also a social cost to the victims of reoffending. Both those costs should be treated as important, but at the moment we are not getting there. Were we to make more effective use of our resources, by concentrating on those who need to be inside for a period of time, we could do the proper rehabilitative work that is needed in many cases. There may be some who it will be impossible to turn around, or who it will never be safe to release.

However, such people are a small minority of the population. In the vast majority of cases, if there is sufficient time, there can be rehabilitative work. That can involve education and training—getting people literate so that they can hold down a job—and dealing with what are sometimes significant addiction problems of one kind or another. That weaning-off cannot be done in a short period, and neither can the acquiring of skills to get back into society. Frequently there are underlying mental health or personality issues that need treatment, and those cannot be dealt with in a short period either.

Short sentences do not permit any of those things to be done, and they often disrupt such ties as the offenders have in the community, as the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge pointed out. The Minister and others have rightly observed that the best way to keep people out of trouble and out of offending is a home, a family and a job. The things we equip people with should mean that when they come out they are better placed to achieve those things, but if they already have them, a short sentence is more likely than not to disrupt them.

To do as I have described, we must have credible alternatives. One of my concerns is the decline in sentences confidence in community sentences that has been noted,
In the past five years, more than 250,000 custodial sentences of six months or less have been given to offenders. More than 300,000 sentences were for 12 months or less. However, nearly two thirds of those offenders go on to commit a further crime within a year of being released. Clearly, custody is not working for those people. They are the ones whose situation we need to address so that, as well as punishment, there can be rehabilitation that stops them reoffending.

Some 27% of all reoffending is committed by those who have served 12 months or less, and the most common offence for which a sentence is given is shoplifting. More often than not, offenders who shoplift have a drug or alcohol problem, and almost half of the sentences in question are given to women; 60% of female offenders who are convicted of shoplifting are victims themselves—many have been victims of domestic violence and have mental health issues. Part of the problem, therefore, is that we are not addressing those issues. We need to tackle them in order to get to the root of why the offending occurs in the first place.

Kate Green: My hon. Friend is right about the high incidence of short custodial sentences imposed on women for shoplifting. Is he aware of the initiative in Greater Manchester that the police have taken up with some large stores? When a woman is found shoplifting in one of those shops, they can immediately refer her not to the police—and into the criminal justice system—but to our women’s centres. Does he agree that that would be a really positive model for the Government to encourage across the whole country?

Bambos Charalambous: I am aware of that initiative. More investment in women’s centres would be a great thing that would help to stop reoffending, particularly by female offenders. I support women’s centres in their plight; we should provide them with as much funding as we can.

All the evidence shows that there is a strong case for abolishing sentences of six months or less, but we also need to have a robust community order regime. The Revolving Doors Agency made a freedom of information request and found that, of those people sentenced to six months in custody, three in five reported a drug or alcohol problem on arrival in prison, one in four were released homeless, and seven in 10 reoffend within a year of release. Clearly short sentences are not working. In his speech on 18 February, the Secretary of State for Justice said:

“Why would we spend taxpayers’ money doing what we know doesn’t work, and indeed, makes us less safe?”

I entirely agree with him about that.

I have touched on some of the issues where our investment could help. Accommodation is a big factor. When people leave prison and they are homeless, they are more prone to reoffend. Clearly, the through-the-gate resettlement service has not been working with the probation service, which needs to be looked at. Making sure that prisoners are housed and have accommodation when they leave prison would help prevent reoffending.

Many of the support services that prisoners need when they are released relate to benefits applications. They also need to be looked at, as well as the mental health support that they need. Sometimes people leave prison having had some treatment, but they do not get
treatment further on. Finally—I meant to mention this earlier—when they are in prison people can receive treatment for some of their addictions, but six months is too short a time for them to have the full support they need. All these areas need investment.

The Secretary of State also said in his speech that he supported “smart” justice. I agree with the gist of what he said, but much more needs to be done. There is a place for punishing people. We need prison for serious offenders, and it should also be there as a deterrent. There may be an issue with why prison is not working as well as it should do; the reoffending rate is high, and there may be issues about what goes on in prison, the prison estate itself, the fact that there are insufficient prison officers, the prevalence of drugs in prison and various other factors. Clearly, prison is not working for some people.

I suggest that community orders are the best way forward for short sentences. There should be an element of rehabilitation but community orders should be tough, should not be treated as a soft touch, should be fully enforced, and people should be made to fulfil them. Serving them over a longer period of time could also help offenders change their ways.

Community orders would also save us money. The Revolving Doors Agency estimates that community sentences would save £9,237 per prisoner. I am often staggered by the fact that it costs roughly the same amount to send somebody to Eton as to send them to prison. I say let us send them to Eton—that is instead of prison, not as well as prison. These areas need to be looked at. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response. I broadly support what the Secretary of State has set out and I hope he has the courage of his convictions to follow through. We could be in a position where these measures save us money in the long run and we are able to rehabilitate offenders, which has long-term benefits for us all.

3.33 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): One of the greatest changes in my lifetime, and indeed my time in Parliament, has been the growing gulf between the preoccupations of the liberal establishment, and the hopes and fears of the people who have to live with the effects of their doubt-filled and guilt-fuelled erosion of the collective wisdom of ages.

That collective wisdom is given shape by institutions, small and large. There are large institutions, such as the law, Parliament, the Church and the monarchy, and small institutions, such as civil society, families and Burke’s “little platoons”. Sadly, what Burke said about order being the foundation of the good life and a working civil society—

“Good order is the foundation of all things.”—

is a far cry from where Britain is now, as a result of the work of that liberal establishment over the decades.

Too much of urban Britain, in particular, is either brutish or brutalised. When good order and the rule of law is eroded, it is the vulnerable who suffer most, for they, unlike those bourgeois liberals who live gated lives, survive on the frontline of crime. Those vulnerable people are suffering at the hands of violent criminals who are punishing them every day, through the fear they cause and the hurt they do.

Yet we are very sheepish now about punishing the culprits. We have learned so little from the time when I studied criminology, almost 40 years ago. We have continued down the road of seeing crime as an illness to be treated, rather than a malevolent choice to be dealt with.

Kate Green: Will the right hon. Member give way?

Sir John Hayes: I will make this point, and then happily give way. The effect of that is to put great emphasis on the culprit and, by nature, less emphasis on the event and the victims of crime. That is precisely what has happened, and I know the hon. Lady could not possibly want to agree with that.

Kate Green: I do not disagree at all that people’s lives are made a misery by violent and persistent criminals in their community, but I cannot really agree that we have become less willing to take action against criminals, when the prison population has gone from between 42,000 and 43,000 in the mid-1990s to more than 80,000 today.

Sir John Hayes: The hon. Lady is a very distinguished Member of this House, with whom I have worked in the past, so I do not want to suggest in any sense that I am patronising her. However, that could be a measure of either the scale of the problem or of our response to it, and I suggest that it is much more likely to be the former. I have to tell her that the view that is frequently expressed in this House—I put it this way only for the sake of brevity, because it is a little more complex—that we should place greater emphasis on the way we deal with criminals, rather than focusing on the way we support victims and protect those who are at risk of crime, is at odds with the sentiments of most of our constituents.

Robert Neill: I have great respect for my right hon. Friend, and I understand the thrust of where he is coming from, but would he reflect on the fact that the two are not mutually exclusive? It is not mutually exclusive to have concern for the victims of crime and, at the same, to consider that one very potent means of having concern for victims of crime is to ensure that those who offend are punished and sentenced in a way that is more likely to rehabilitate and reform them than not. As a one-nation Tory of the cavalier tradition like I, he will know that few are beyond redemption.

Sir John Hayes: It is, of course, right that we need to consider the causes of crime. That is why I have talked about the erosion of civil society. Of course it is true that when communities become weaker, and when the ties that bind us become looser, people are more likely to act in a malign way. As my hon. Friend knows, life in the state of nature is “nasty, brutish and short”. What stands between us and all of that are the things that I have described—the civil society that Burke defined and that I attempted to illustrate. The truth is that when we emphasise crime as an ill to be treated, by nature we put less emphasis on its effect: the event itself. In that way, there is often, although not necessarily, a tension between one position and the other.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): Although linguistically my right hon. Friend may be correct, and in language we may sound as
though we are more liberal, the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) pointed out the reality. Not simply do we incarcerate twice as many people as we did 25 years ago, but the crime rate has almost halved over the same period, so proportionately, the number of people incarcerated per crime is considerably more than it was 25 years ago. Typically, this is the hypocrisy of liberalism: we talk a liberal language, but in fact we are much more punitive than the Victorians were. In the Victorian period at the end of the 19th century, there were only four prisoners held in prison for sentences longer than two years. Now, for the first time, we have a very large number of young men serving 25 or 30-year prison sentences.

Sir John Hayes: My hon. Friend the Minister knows that that argument is predicated on several misassumptions. The first is the fundamental issue of population growth. Of course when we look to the past there were fewer criminals, because there were fewer people. The second, as he will know, is the very well-known criminological explanation of under-counting and under-reporting of crime: it is known as the black or dark figure, the number of crimes that are never reported and therefore never recorded. It also is probably true that the tolerance of crime has risen and more and more of what might be described as petty crimes, which would once have been taken very seriously, are now ignored, partly because people do not think they will be dealt with. That happens in all our constituencies all the time.

The third problem is that there has been a prevailing view about rehabilitation that, while not intrinsically incompatible with the idea of just deserts and a retributive approach to crime, is too often presented as such by people who are on what I described as the “liberal” side of this argument. Part of the business of the criminal justice system is to punish, and part of public faith in the criminal justice system relies and depends on people believing that those who do very bad things get their just deserts. Frankly, every poll that the Minister or I could cite shows that a growing number of people do not think that criminals get their just deserts.

There is a separate issue about what happens once people get to prison; my hon. Friend is the Prisons Minister, so he will know what a mess prisons are in. I hope he is trying to do something about that, because he is right that when people go to prison, one hopes they will not go back. Recidivism is a profound concern, but given that he is the Minister, that is as much his problem as anyone’s.

Rory Stewart: Since my right hon. Friend has taken the opportunity to challenge the statistics and suggest that they can be explained by population growth, population growth from 1992 to 2018 in Britain has been approximately 10%. The prison population during that period has doubled. This cannot be accounted for by population growth.

Sir John Hayes: Yes, but if we look at the number of crimes committed in the year of my birth, 1958—I know that is hard to believe, but that is the year—compared with the number of crimes committed now, in almost every category crimes have grown. The number of homicides, for example, in that year, the number of violent crimes in that year, the number of sex-related crimes in that year—if the Minister looks at the figures, which by the way are available from the Library, he will see that in all those categories and many others, the number of crimes has grown immensely over my lifetime, the period I mentioned at the beginning of my remarks.

I want to address the specifics of the debate introduced by the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves). It is useful that she has brought this matter to the attention of the House, because the figures from the Minister’s Department make clear that the effect of doing what I understand the Minister has advocated, and with which others may agree, would essentially be that 34,000 offenders who currently go to prison would no longer do so. Roughly speaking, 30,000 of those are repeat, not new offenders. Their offences include burglary, theft, public order offences and weapon and drug possession, as well as drink-driving and other similar things.

Those are not offences that most members of the public would regard as inconsequential, slight or not a cause for worry—far from it. I suspect that the vast majority of our constituents would anticipate that those sorts of things should attract a prison sentence. If any hon. Members take the opposite view, I would be happy to debate with them in their constituencies on a public platform, and see who held the majority view and who was seen to be on the margins. I wonder whether the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) is on the margins; I will give way to him.

Bambos Charalambous: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. He has just said that there are 30,000 repeat offenders. Those are people who have already been to prison, so clearly that would indicate that prison has not worked for them and we should look at other forms of punishment. Does he agree that prison is not the only form of punishment that would act as a deterrent, and that other options might work better and stop people being recycled into prison?

Sir John Hayes: I mentioned recidivism a moment ago, but since the hon. Gentleman was clearly listening, I cannot have made myself clear. I did not say people who had been to prison once; I said repeat offenders. These may be people who have had other kinds of sentences and then gone to prison, because very often, for a first offence, people do not go to prison; they go to prison for a second or later offence. When I speak of repeat offenders, I do not necessarily mean people who are in and out of prison regularly. It is very important to be precise about these things.

The problem with that kind of policy is not only what it would do to public faith in criminal justice, on which it would have a devastating effect—in its response to the Government’s proposals, Civitas, the think-tank, says that it would unleash a crime wave on hundreds of thousands of citizens—but that it would reinforce the idea that prison cannot work. We have profound problems at present; the Minister is aware of that and has spoken very openly and straightforwardly about it. The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate has just alluded to those problems—prisons becoming universities of crime, where people who go in are worsened by the experience, rather than rehabilitated.
Even from the rehabilitative perspective, therefore, prison is not doing what it could, but that is not a good enough reason to say to the public: “We are worried about sending people to prison, because they might get worse, so we will leave them on the streets.” That cannot be the signal that this place or this Government want to send. Let us get our prisons right, not be embarrassed or ashamed to send people there.

Kate Green: The point we are trying to make in this debate is that people are going to prison for short sentences. By definition, that is unlikely to be for the level of serious crimes that the right hon. Gentleman rightly says our constituents would be horrified if they thought people could commit and then run around at liberty. He is right that we are talking about, in some cases, persistent offenders. A written answer from the Minister, which I received on 5 November last year, said that in 2017, 6,793 people went to prison for less than six months, having never previously received a community penalty for offences that they had committed. I find that baffling. Does the right hon. Gentleman not think that sometimes we are too ready to use custody?

Sir John Hayes: All I would say in response to that is that the hon. Lady will have seen the national newspaper this week that showed, shockingly, a picture on the front cover of a smirking criminal who, having committed an offence for the second time, took a selfie of himself outside the court. This was a person who was found in possession of both a knife and cocaine, and had been known to the police for a considerable time. Time permitting, I could give account of many similar stories, and particularly of the police’s frustration when we do not, in their judgment, provide the just deserts that they had committed. I find that baffling. Does the right hon. Gentleman not think that we are ready to use custody?

Rory Stewart: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir John Hayes: I will give way one last time, but then I really must conclude, because others may want to speak.

Rory Stewart: The only reason I keep intervening is that, unfortunately, my right hon. Friend will be unable to hear my speech, so will be unable to hear me answer, point by point, every point that he makes. Evidence from the Ministry of Justice strongly suggests that sending somebody to prison makes them more likely to reoffend, by one offence a year, than somebody given a non-custodial sentence. Given that the short-sentence population in a single year is about 50,000 people, my right hon. Friend’s proposals would indirectly inflict 50,000 additional offences on innocent victims in Britain. In other words, the wrong use of short prison sentences endangers the public, rather than protecting them.

Sir John Hayes: Yes, but by letting on to the streets 34,000 people who would currently go to prison, we would by nature make it more likely that those people would have more victims, unless the Minister believes that those non-custodial sentences have a perfect effect—are an entire solution. I think that the Minister should refocus his efforts on getting prisons right, as I would not want his ministerial career to be characterised by prisons being worse when he ended than when he started. I know he is determined to do so, but he has a lot of work to do. The Government have to pull their socks up in respect of the way our prisons are run, partly because of the policies adopted by previous Governments.

My earlier offer applies to the Minister, too: I would be happy for him to come to my constituency, or for me to go to his, and debate this issue with the people there, to see whether they think that fewer or more criminals should be sent to prison. When they know that we are speaking of the kind of crimes that I described earlier, according to data from the Minister’s own Department, I think they would not only be surprised but, frankly, be outraged.

G.K. Chesterton spoke of the people of England who have not spoken yet, but now the people of England are speaking loud and clear. There may be those who have been deafened by the shrill bleating of political correctness, but many of us have not. We will speak for the people of England, and we will not be silenced.

3.53 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) on securing this important debate. “Follow that” is still ring ing in my ears; I will make an attempt. She gave a positive and persuasive argument for looking at 12-month prison sentences, talking about how squalid prisons do not help with rehabilitation, drug abuse or mental illness, and looking at the difficulties for prisoners of being released.

The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), who chairs the Justice Committee, gave us the benefit of his time in the criminal justice system, although I should add that that was as a barrister. He talked about constructive punishment and the good use of public money, saying that prisons must reform and rehabilitate, and that the high rates of reoffending of those who serve short sentences have a social and monetary cost. The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) further exemplified some of the difficulties with short-term prison sentences. He talked about women and shoplifting, looking at the other side—why they commit such crimes and what we can do to prevent that. That is an important issue, which the Scottish Government have taken on board a bit. I will speak further on what we are doing in Scotland, which I know the Minister and the Secretary of State have been looking at.

The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) gave a speech at odds with a lot of what had already been said. He spoke with real passion about how people who do bad things should get their just deserts. The abolition of prison sentences of up to 12 months is not about people not getting their just deserts; it is about an effective use of the prison estate and of public money that actually helps people not to reoffend. That is how we look at things in Scotland.

The Scottish National party is committed to smart justice and proportionate, just and effective responses. A focus on community sentences in place of short
custodial sentences has helped to achieve a 19-year low in reconviction rates in Scotland, and it is encouraging to see the UK Government following Scotland’s lead in this area. Scotland has the highest imprisonment rate in western Europe, with 144 per 100,000 of the population incarcerated. The average length of prison sentences has increased by 21% over the last decade. For many individuals, however, prison is not an effective solution.

Individuals released from short sentences of 12 months or less are reconvicted nearly twice as often as those sentenced to a community payback order. It makes sense to look at community payback orders. Community sentencing has proven to be an effective tool in replacement of short sentences, as the statistics bear out. Between 2006-07 and 2015-16, the reconviction rate in Scotland fell by 5.4%, to a 19-year low, while the average number of reconvictions per offender has fallen by 22% over the last 10 years. Under the SNP Government, completion rates for community sentences have increased to 70%.

Around 7 million hours of unpaid work have been carried out since community payback orders were introduced, delivering real benefits to communities. In 2017-18, some 1.7 million hours of unpaid work were imposed as part of these orders, and the projects undertaken ranged from support for winter resilience to the refurbishment and redecoration of community spaces. I have seen many such things in my constituency—work that would not otherwise be done, improving how the community lives and works. Overall, recorded crime is at its second-lowest level since 1974, down 42% since 2006-07.

Robert Neill: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving examples of what has been very effective in Scotland. It is asserted that the public equate just deserts and punishment only with imprisonment. Does she agree that, when the public see community sentences in operation, they are often much more appreciative of the constructive way in which somebody is being punished while doing some good at the same time? The public are not as blinkered in their views as is sometimes suggested, once they see good schemes working.

Marion Fellows: Indeed. Several projects that have been undertaken are marked by plaques saying how that was done. It is really positive that people can see that there are other ways. The public are not necessarily bloodthirsty or looking for people to be locked up and the key thrown away. They want people to be better. I have been around Shotts prison in my neighbouring constituency and looked at the good rehabilitation work it does. It follows that, if prisons are full of people on short sentences, there will be less time and money available for real rehabilitative work within the prison system. While prison is still the right place for the most serious offenders, the extension of the presumption against short sentences to 12 months would help to ensure that prison was used only when the judiciary decided it was necessary, having considered alternatives.

The Scottish Government have spent quite a bit of money working on that basis, because it is important. I hope that this Minister will say that, if and when that happens in England, the UK Government will put money into the equivalent of the criminal justice social work services that we have in Scotland. It cannot just be said, “We won’t put people in prison and therefore we’ll save money.” Some money has to be put into the restorative justice system and community criminal justice. The Scottish Government have given additional funding for community sentences and women offenders, which includes additional provision for bail supervision for women. A number of years ago, there was a suggestion to build a new women’s prison in Scotland. That was stopped because what we are trying to do now is more preventive work and more work that does not separate women from their families, especially their children.

Lots of work has been done, and there are statistics proving that things such as workloads have gone down in the criminal justice system. The number of criminal justice social work reports submitted and social work orders issued both fell by 6%. That is another saving for the criminal justice system. There has also been a 7% drop in community payback orders recently.

In Scotland, we do things in partnership across the system, from local government all the way up to the national Government. The Scottish Government are committed to working with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, Social Work Scotland, Community Justice Scotland, local authorities and third-sector partners, which take a great deal of interest and do some of the work when it comes to preparations for community payback orders.

It is strange to me, standing here opposite the Minister, whom I might quote in a moment, that Conservative MSPs in Holyrood criticise the SNP’s approach. It is very encouraging to see the UK Government looking to follow Scotland’s lead in this matter. What exists in Scotland has sometimes been called “soft-touch justice” in a derogatory sense, but it is actually proving to be effective and a much better way to use our prison estate. As the Justice Secretary said last month:

“Why would we spend taxpayers’ money doing what we know doesn’t work, and indeed, makes us less safe?”

This Minister has said:

“My No. 1 priority is to protect the public. I believe that the best way of protecting the public is to reduce significantly, if not eliminate, the under 12-month prison population, because people on community sentences are less likely to reoffend than people who are put in custody.”

The Justice Secretary has also said:

“If we can find effective alternatives to short sentences, it is not a question of pursuing a soft-justice approach, but rather a case of pursuing smart justice that is effective at reducing reoffending and crime. That is the approach that I want to take in England and Wales.”—[Official Report, 5 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 146.]

I am glad that there is almost unanimity across the House in this matter.

I believe that evidence was given to the Justice Committee by Karyn McCluskey, chief executive of Community Justice Scotland. She says in relation to Scotland:

“We have been on a prevention journey for the past 15 years. Short-term prison sentences do not reduce offending. It causes homelessness and breaks up any positive bonds”

that offenders may have. She concludes:

“Our courts and prisons should not be de facto psychiatric hospitals. I have met people who would much prefer to go to jail: it’s much easier for them. We want to change society’s view of what works.”

I think that that is really where we all are.
4.5 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): It is, of course, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. First, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) for bringing this very important debate to the Chamber. She is right to say that it follows a number of linked debates of equal value. That shows the interest among hon. Members in this important subject, and I thank hon. Members for their valuable contributions.

The starting point is that we cannot shy away from the fact that many short sentences simply do not work. The points in that respect have been eloquently made by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge and for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), and, of course, by the Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill). The reoffending rate for those serving a sentence shorter than 12 months is higher than that for community orders or suspended sentences. That is causing real damage not just to communities and victims, but to the public finances—another point that has been made. Short sentence reoffending is conservatively estimated to cost the economy between £7 billion and £10 billion a year; others rightly say that the figure could be £15 billion or more.

It is glaringly obvious why short sentences are so ineffective. An offender who is sentenced to just a few months or even a few weeks will still lose their job, their home and their family. These are all things that offenders themselves say are factors that influence whether they reoffend. The problems are exactly the same as those that an offender serving a sentence that runs into years experiences, but crucially, people serving short sentences are not in prison long enough to put in place steps to address these needs before their release.

An offender serving a short sentence also has no time for purposeful activity, which is proven to reduce reoffending. They have no time to equip themselves with skills or gain qualifications to get a job and pay for a home after release, because in most cases a course cannot be taught and skills cannot be gained in a matter of months, particularly when much of the time is spent isolated in cells due to the lack of experienced prison officers and the other issues that we face in the emergency that exists within our prisons.

There is also no time to get help with regard to other drivers of offending, such as mental health issues and substance misuse. Her Majesty’s inspectorate of prisons states that one prisoner in three has mental health issues—a problem that is undoubtedly much greater than is portrayed—and one prisoner in five tested positive for drugs and psychoactive substances in 2017-18. Those are real, serious problems that these offenders face, but when serving short sentences they cannot get the treatment or rehabilitation that they need to get their lives in order. In some cases, people need rehab and medical attention, not cells.

It is clear that we need to end the use of ineffective short sentences, but although the Government have floated the idea on several occasions, the reality is that they are not doing much about it; we have yet to see them take any concrete action.

The proportion of short custodial sentences has barely shifted in the past three years. More staggeringly, community sentences, which can provide an alternative to short custodial sentences, have fallen by 78% over the past five years, with the fastest decline being for non-violent theft and drug offences. The Minister’s first step must be to halt this worrying trend. Forgive me if I do not entirely believe that the Government will act.

I am even less assured by the Government’s record, because every major policy announcement that the Ministry of Justice has made on prisons falls short of the mark and has come to nothing thus far. The female offender strategy promised five new residential women’s centres—a rehashed Labour idea—which are nowhere near being built. The educational employment strategy scrapped careers advice in prison, which is a negative step, and has not done much beyond that. The Minister’s 10 prisons safety project is failing to deliver improvements in safety anywhere, let alone across the whole estate.

If we have learnt anything from the MOJ it is that it is all noise and no substance. I wish that were not the case. The overuse of short sentences is a substantial and important issue. We want to be able to work with the Government on this. We agree that short sentences do not work and that locking someone up for just a few weeks or months provides no benefit to anyone. We have common ground to build on.

However, the Government do not seem serious about tackling short sentence overuse. If they were serious, they would ensure that there was a real alternative to custody, in the form of robust community sentences or a stricter fines regime; they would not allow the disaster that is our probation system, which provides community sentences, to continue; and they would address the dangerous lack of confidence among magistrates in the probation system and community sentences—a point that the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst made very well.

A study conducted last year with the support of the Magistrates Association found that 37% of magistrates are not confident that community sentences are an effective alternative, 45% are not confident that community sentences currently rehabilitate effectively, and almost half believe that community sentences cannot be tailored to suit the individual needs of an offender. By contrast, a survey in 2003 showed that magistrates had much higher levels of confidence in the ability of community sentences to punish and rehabilitate offenders.
[Imran Hussain]

Even after that study and numerous recent, high-profile and wide-ranging critical reports, the Government are continuing with their failed privatisation experiment in probation. The reports are long and damning. Her Majesty’s inspectorate of probation found nine out of 13 community rehabilitation companies to be performing poorly overall, with poor-quality work in reducing reoffending and protecting the public. The Justice Committee ripped into poor performance on reoffending, concerning high workloads and worries over the confidence of judges and magistrates—a point made earlier. Last Friday’s National Audit Office report found that CRCs failed to meet MOJ targets to reduce reoffending and had created an increase in offenders on short sentences who were recalled. Community sentences simply are not viable under their current providers. Magistrates and judges do not trust them, and neither do the public.

We have heard about Scotland’s model in contrast to the Government’s action. The Labour shadow Justice team has committed to bringing probation services back in-house to deliver a service that works, has the confidence of judges and magistrates, and can show the public that there is a real robust alternative to short custodial sentences. The shadow Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), recently visited Scotland, where a presumption against short sentences is being rolled out. He saw the positive work done to deliver justice for the public and victims through sentencing alternatives that do reduce reoffending.

The use of community sentences in Scotland has risen by 16% in the past decade, which contrasts to a decline in England and Wales. The Scottish model has been in place for some time and shows a clear way forward, which the Government must seriously address.

The Government must show that they are capable of more than just words and setting the mood music; they must prove that they are serious. The Minister must set out what they are doing to end the huge overuse of ineffective short sentences, which serve little purpose in our justice system, including what action they are taking to stop the dramatic fall in the use of community sentences in recent years and how long it will be before the MOJ gets the proportion of community sentences back to previous levels.

Addressing this important issue can reduce reoffending, so I extend an offer to work with the Minister to bring reoffending down. However, that offer is not a blank cheque. A new consensus must be built on strong proposals by the Government. The Minister must show us that he is doing this for the right reasons: to reduce reoffending and better serve the public, not just to reduce the prison population. He needs to outline how he will regain the confidence and trust of the judiciary, which the Government have lost with their probation changes. Given the growing number of damning reports on these probation changes and their failure to reduce reoffending, he must commit to ending the failed privatisation experiment, which cannot deliver the viable and robust alternatives to custody that are needed, and bring this back into public ownership.

4.15 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) for bringing this important debate.

To think clearly about prison, we need to think about victims, and we must begin with a strong statement that the prime responsibility of the Government is to protect the public. That is particularly true at the front line, when we are dealing with the horror of knife crime. We need to be absolutely clear—as this Government and, I hope, Members on both sides of the House are—about our abhorrence of crime and the misery it inflicts on victims, about our absolute commitment to punish criminals in proportion to their offence, and about ensuring, above all, that serious criminals are imprisoned.

We can go beyond that, because the point is that somebody who commits an offence is not simply technically breaking the law. For example, a shoplifter imposes misery on the individual who owns a private shop by stealing valuable possessions and affecting their psychological sense of security. Therefore, in responding to that act, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) has pointed out, we need to ensure that we punish them for the crime they committed, not only to give justice to the victim but to protect future victims of crime.

The nub of the issue is that punishment needs to be combined with deterrence and rehabilitation, and to symbolically express society’s abhorrence of crime. All that is true, and all that was recognised by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes). However, where I respectfully disagree with him—I regret that he did not stay to hear my response—is that he must be more rigorous and serious in thinking through whether, in fact, a short-term prison sentence achieves any of the objectives that he wants to achieve.

Let me take a single example. In Bedford prison last month I saw a prisoner who had been a heroin addict and had serious learning difficulties. Every time he is released from prison, he shoplifts again and he gets put back in prison for four weeks—he was put in Bedford prison eight times last year. My question to my right hon. Friend is this: what does it achieve to put this man in prison eight times in a year? Clearly it is not deterring him from committing crime or rehabilitating him, because he commits another crime as soon as he comes out. He does not even personally experience this as a punishment, so what is being done here?

Perhaps the judge feels that they have no other options, because the individual has committed many other crimes in the past. What else are they supposed to do? Yet what does imprisoning them achieve? Perhaps the judge feels that it is a symbolic disapproval of the act of shoplifting, but what kind of symbolism is it if it is untethered from reality? What is the symbolism of a punishment that does not deter, does not punish, does not rehabilitate and is not experienced subjectively by the victim or by society as having any purpose at all?

We then need to think about prisons, which are vast, complex, expensive organs of Government. A modern prison costs more than £100 million to build. It is manned by hundreds of highly trained prison officers, filled with electronic equipment and fitted with bars on its windows. It is a continual fight, day in, day out, which requires energy and dedication, to stay on top of the drugs and the phones to challenge violence from prisoners and against prison officers, to control issues of suicide and self-harm, and, above all, to protect the public from the most serious offenders in society.
Short-term prisoners destabilise the whole prison system. They are the ones who disproportionately bring drugs into prisons, because they are the people who go in and out eight times a year—if a criminal gang is looking for somebody to carry drugs in, they target a short-term prisoner, not somebody who is in for 25 years and has no opportunity. They disproportionally have learning difficulties and addiction problems; they are disproportionally connected with violence against prison officers and against themselves.

Short-term prisoners also absorb disproportionately more time in the system than should be attributed to them. That distracts the entire system from focusing on rehabilitating and working with the serious criminals, such as the sex offenders, violent offenders and murderers, who pose a significant threat to the public and who, because of the distraction of this cohort, are not getting the education programmes, work and protection that they require.

As the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) has pointed out, we can do much more in relation to community sentences. We have just introduced GPS-enabled tagging, which for the first time allows us to know exactly where an offender is in the community by the minute, day in, day out. We have also introduced alcohol and drug monitoring tests, which for the first time allow us to know whether an individual outside prison is taking drugs or alcohol in violation of their conditions. We are improving unpaid work and investing in community rehabilitation companies to make sure that they have better supervision in place, that they are meeting people face to face and that they have a proper plan in place to follow them through.

We are investing in addiction treatment in the NHS. Again, with deference to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings, that is not just liberal nonsense. Shoplifters make up by far the largest element in the under-six-months prison population, and 74% of shoplifters are addicted to heroin or crack cocaine. There is a direct causative relationship between their addiction to heroin or crack cocaine and their shoplifting. As the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) pointed out, that investment in NHS treatment requirements will be central if we are to reduce their reoffending.

The key point is that putting these people in prison is not simply futile, but perverse. It is not simply a waste of time; it makes the situation worse. It does not protect the public, but endangers them. A considerable amount of research has now been done on that. The National Institute of Economic and Social Research did a paper on it in 2012 and the Ministry of Justice did another in 2013.

We have just produced another paper that looks at 350,000 offenders and 130 variables—everything from offender demographics to school attendance, family, childhood and trauma—to produce a statistically significant survey of a large number of people that compares like with like. By taking two people who have both committed seven offences and who have almost identical backgrounds and offending histories—in so far as we can; we are looking at a statistical variation of 5%—it shows that the one who is given a custodial sentence, as opposed to the one who is given a community sentence, is likely to commit one extra offence a year. Some 50,000 people get custodial sentences, so that is 50,000 more victims of crime because of the wrong type of short prison sentence.

There is much that we should still learn from Scotland and much that we need to reflect on. It is important to bring people such as my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings with us and keep public confidence. He may be correct that if we were to go in front of an audience, without the time to present incredibly serious and detailed research, it would be possible to whip up a crowd against it through cheap language about decriminalisation and laxity. I do not doubt that. The evidence is absolutely clear, however, and we should be bold in asking what we are trying to achieve with a prison or a community sentence. Is this prison sentence really deterring this individual? Is it really rehabilitating them? Above all, is it really protecting the public?

4.25 pm

Ellie Reeves: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for taking part in this important debate, particularly the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), the Chair of the Justice Committee, who co-sponsored the application for the debate and has done a huge amount of work to push the issue up the agenda.

I echo what other hon. Members have said. A presumption against short sentences is not about being soft on crime, but about following the evidence. We have heard that evidence today, which is clear that community sentences are more effective in reducing reoffending than short prison sentences. Short prison sentences simply exacerbate the problem. It is clear from the debate that there is cross-party support for reducing the use of short sentences, which I hope we can continue to build on in future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the cost and effectiveness of sentences under 12 months and consequences for the prison population.

4.26 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Day 1—Internal Market and Industry

The Competitiveness Council took place on 18-19 February. I represented the UK on Day 1 (Internal Market and Industry) and by the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore), on Day 2 (Research and Space).

Commissioner Bienkowska presented the Commission’s analysis on integrated value chains in the single market. A number of member states called for the single market and services to be at the centre of the March European Council discussion on jobs, growth and competitiveness. The UK recalled the close integration of UK and EU supply chains. The presidency concluded that it would summarise views in writing to the President of the European Council.

The presidency and member states welcomed the co-ordinated action plan on artificial intelligence (AI) and stressed the need for EU and national action to boost cross-border research networks and data flows to maximise EU competitiveness. Commissioner Bienkowska called for the EU to put in place ethical and legal frameworks in line with fundamental rights, stressing the importance of flexibility to encourage innovation. The UK noted that our approach aligned closely with the co-ordinated action plan and called for continuing collaboration to help maintain Europe’s international competitiveness. The Council adopted “Conclusions on the co-ordinated plan on the development and use of artificial intelligence made in Europe”.

The Commission introduced its long-term climate strategy stressing the importance of all sectors contributing to decarbonisation. Member states supported the need for coherence across all policy areas, noting the importance of the circular economy and driving innovation. The UK and others highlighted the opportunities for EU industry provided by combating climate change which could be expected to lead to an overall net increase in higher skilled jobs.

On the European semester, the Commission highlighted competitiveness priorities following the adoption of the annual growth survey in November 2018.

The Commission updated the Council on the recent ECJ ruling against the real driving emissions (RDE) legislation. The UK and others called for the Commission to take action to ensure greater certainty for the automobile industry and sufficient time for them to adapt. The Commission noted that the ECJ did not question the revised tests themselves, but rather the way the Commission had enacted the legislation.

The presidency noted that agreement with the Parliament had been reached on the directive on digital tools in company law and the regulation on enforcement of EU harmonisation legislation on products. The Commission noted that the regulation would improve product safety by facilitating engagement with businesses, co-ordination of market surveillance activities and co-operation between market surveillance authorities and customs authorities.

Day 2—Research

Day 2 of the Competitiveness Council focused on an exchange of views on the Horizon Europe Package—Framework programme for research and innovation 2021-2027. The presidency concluded that there was a broad consensus on making missions relevant to all member states and that the European Innovation Council (EIC) would need to operate in complementary manner with the European Institute for Innovation and Technology (EIT) and InvestEU. The presidency said that it would try to find a balanced compromise in forthcoming trilogues.

The Council concluded with a brief update on the ITER project. The Commission confirmed that ITER was back on track and delays/cost overruns had been addressed.

[HCWS1355]

EDUCATION

Relationships and Sex Education

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): Today, the Secretary of State for Education, will provide a statement to the House, updating on the Government’s proposals for the draft regulations and guidance for relationships education, relationships and sex education, and health education following public consultation. The draft guidance and other materials will be published at: www.gov.uk, following the statement.

[HCWS1356]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Foods Standards Agency: Contingencies Fund Cash Advance

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): The Food Standards Agency (FSA) is seeking an advance from the Contingencies Fund to meet its cash funding obligations relating to preparation work for EU exit. This work has been ongoing throughout this financial year to ensure day one readiness ensuring food safety, supply and security.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £11,000,000 and capital of £3,000,000 will be sought for a supplementary estimate for the Food Standards Agency. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £10,000,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

The advance will be repaid upon Royal Assent of the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill.

[HCWS1354]

No-deal EU Exit: Medicines and Medical Products

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): Today, I am updating the House on the Department for Health and Social Care’s plans for the continuity of medicines and medical products in the event we exit the EU without a deal.

My Department has been working closely with trade bodies, product suppliers, the health and care system in England, the Devolved Administrations (DAs) and the Crown Dependencies, to ensure the continuation of the
supply of medicines and medical products to the whole of the UK in the event of a no deal EU Exit. This includes the NHS, social care and the independent sector and covers medicines (prescription, pharmacy and general sales list medicines); medical devices and clinical consumables (such as needles and syringes); supplies for clinical trials; vaccines and countermeasures; and blood, tissue and transplant materials.

Together with industry and the health and care system, my Department has analysed the supply chains of 12,300 medicines, close to half a million product lines of medical devices and clinical consumables, vaccines used in national and local programmes, and essential non-clinical goods on which the health and care system relies, such as linen, scrubs and food.

We have also assessed contract risks associated with potential no-deal EU exit in the broader NHS and social care sector in England and within the DAs and are working with suppliers to ensure adequate mitigations are in place for non-clinical goods and services (e.g. hospital food, laundry, IT contracts, etc.).

This has been a very large undertaking but we are grateful for the excellent engagement from all parties—our plans are well advanced as a result.

While we never give guarantees, we are confident that, if everyone—including suppliers, freight companies, international partners and the health and care system—does what they need to do, the supply of medicines and medical products should be uninterrupted in the event of exiting the EU without a deal.

My Department has well established routine procedures to deal with medicine shortages, from whatever cause, and works closely with the MHRA, the pharmaceutical industry, NHS England and others operating in the supply chain to help prevent shortages and to ensure that the risks to patients are minimised when they do arise.

There is no hard evidence to date to suggest current issues are increasing as a result of EU exit.

My Department has overall responsibility on behalf of the Devolved Administrations for ensuring the continuity of supply of medicines, and they have opted to utilise our contingency arrangements so we can work together to ensure the supply of medical devices and clinical consumables. Therefore, all supply arrangements take into account the whole of the UK, reflecting the engagement and co-operation of our colleagues in the DAs.

Around three quarters of the registered medicines and over half the clinical consumables the UK uses come from (or via) the EU. Government estimate that the key risk to supply is reduced traffic flow at the short straits crossing (ie between Calais and Dover or Folkstone).

My Department has put in place a multi-layered approach to minimise any supply disruption:

Building up buffer stocks and stockpiling before 29 March in the following areas:

**Medicines:** We have analysed 12,300 licensed medicines products. Around 1,800 of these were determined to not be relevant as no longer marketed in the UK.

For the remaining approximately 7,000 ‘POM’ (prescription-only medicines) and ‘P’ (pharmacy only medicines, that can be purchased only from a pharmacy without a prescription) with an EU/EEA touchpoint, we have been working with suppliers to ensure they increase their buffer stocks to hold at least an additional six weeks of stock (over and above usual buffer stock) in the UK before 29 March. The vast majority of companies have confirmed stockpiling plans are in place. For those medicines that cannot be stockpiled because, for example, they have short shelf-lives, such as medical radioisotopes, we have asked suppliers to make alternative routes using airfreight, which some suppliers already do now.

For general sales list (GSL medicines)—also known as over-the-counter or OTC products), 500 of which have a EU touchpoint, we have worked with NHS England to identify those which are important for the management of specific health conditions, and are working with suppliers to assure contingency plans for those products.

**Medical devices and clinical consumables:** My Department has placed extra orders for the medical devices and clinical consumables which NHS supply chain routinely stocks. Although the NHS supply chain organisation normally only covers England, we have worked closely with the national procurement and logistics services in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, to ensure their demand levels for the UK are covered. Not all suppliers have the capability to hold stock of their full product range in the UK and routinely supply product directly from EU distribution centres to care providers or patients. These suppliers are working on their own contingency measures; however, we have also put in place national contingency measures to provide a reliable and responsive means of moving product into the UK, including additional daily air freight capacity from Maastricht to Birmingham.

**Blood, tissues and transplants:** NHSBT manages the blood supply in England and is working to ensure there is no disruption to this. We are largely self-sufficient in blood and blood components and do not export or import these products in large quantities. In exceptional cases we export or import very rare blood for urgent clinical need, usually in single unit quantities. NHSBT has put in place stockpiles and other contingency arrangements to ensure a continuous supply of blood (including frozen plasma) and transplant materials. NHSBT has been collaborating with the other UK blood services and is working with its EU counterparts to ensure that the current organ exchange arrangements can continue post exit. The regulators are working with licensed establishments so the import of tissues and cells from EU countries can continue.

**Vaccines and countermeasures:** My Department is taking the same approach to the supply of vaccines and countermeasures as we are for the supply of medicines (in terms of stockpiling, warehousing and replenishment). Public Health England (PHE) manages significant stockpiles of vaccines for the national immunisation programme across the whole of the UK, as part of their business as usual planning. PHE is working with vaccine suppliers to ensure replenishment of these existing stockpiles continues in the event of supply disruption in the UK.

**Supplies for clinical trials:** We are working with organisations running clinical trials and have requested these organisations to consider their supply chains for clinical trials ahead of 29 March. We have requested that they ensure contingency arrangements are in place for their supplies. Supplies of clinical trials are transported in small quantities and usually via airfreight.
Non-clinical goods and services: We have been working closely with a range of NHS and social care providers and suppliers to ensure mitigations are in place for non-clinical goods and services (e.g. hospital food, laundry, IT contracts).

Buying extra warehouse space: To ensure sufficient space to store these products, we have agreed contracts for additional warehouse space, including ambient, refrigerated and controlled drug storage. Last week we updated industry on how they can access this additional storage.

Securing, via the Department of Transport (DfT), additional roll on, roll off freight capacity (away from the short straits) from 29 March.

Contracts have been signed by DfT with two ferry companies for the next six months. These routes are away from the Dover Straits where most goods flow from the EU and will run from the following routes: Cherbourg—Poole, Le Havre—Portsmouth, Roscoff—Plymouth, Caen—Portsmouth, Vlaardingen—Immingham, Cuxhaven—Immingham and Vlaardingen—Felixstowe. The Government have purchased the tickets from the shipping freight operators, and these will be sold on at market rate.

There is cross-Government agreement that all medicines and medical products will be prioritised on these alternative routes to ensure the flow of all these products may continue unimpeded.

Companies which supply medicines or medical goods will be offered the option of buying tickets on these routes and my Department is currently engaging with industry to ascertain the likely uptake levels.

We have worked with the pharmaceutical industry to ensure that plans are contracted to bring in medical radioisotopes under the appropriate specialist conditions.

Making changes to, or clarifications of, certain regulatory requirements so that companies can continue to sell their products in the UK even if we have no deal. The MHRA has for this scenario consulted on, and published, further guidance on how medicines, medical devices and clinical trials will be regulated. This guidance can be found at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/further-guidance-note-on-the-regulation-of-medicines-medical-devices-and-clinical-trials-if-theres-no-brexit-deal.

In August, the Government also published a dedicated technical notice on the unilateral recognition of batch testing of medicines, if there is no deal. This can be found at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/batch-testing-medicines-if-theres-no-brexit-deal.

Strengthening the processes and resources used to deal with shortages. My Department has put in place legislation to enable Ministers to issue serious shortage protocols that, where appropriate, enable community pharmacists to supply against a protocol instead of a prescription without going back to the prescriber first. We are working closely with the DAs to ensure a common approach across the UK.

This multi-layered approach is essential: A combination of securing freight, buffer stocks, stockpiling and warehousing, and regulatory requirements, will be needed to help ensure the continuity of medicines and medical supplies in the event of a no-deal exit.

Local stockpiling is unnecessary and could cause shortages in other areas, which could put patient care at risk. It is important that patients order their repeat prescriptions as normal and keep taking their medicines as normal.

[HCWS1358]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Counter Terrorism Legislation: Codes of Practice

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid); On 14 March 2018, in response to the poisoning in Salisbury of Sergei and Yulia Skripal and Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey, the Prime Minister announced a package of measures to harden our defences against hostile state activity.

As a first step, schedule 3 to the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019 provides for new powers to stop, question, search and detain a person at a UK port or the Northern Ireland border area for the purpose of determining whether they are, or have been, engaged in hostile activity. These provisions will serve to address a current gap in our ability to tackle the threat posed by hostile state actors and mirror in many respects the existing powers to stop and question persons at UK ports for counter-terrorism purposes.

The Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019 also amends schedule 7 to the Terrorism Act 2000 to give effect to two recommendations of the former Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, Lord Anderson: providing for the suspension of the examination clock while someone receives medical treatment; and including a bar on the use of oral answers given in examination in subsequent criminal proceedings.

The 2019 Act also amends schedule 7 restrictions concerning the right of a detainee to consult a solicitor (by replacing the power for a qualified officer to sit within the sight and hearing of a lawyer-client consultation in certain limited circumstances with a power allowing a senior officer, in those limited circumstances, to direct that the person consults a different lawyer); and limits the power of the state to expand an information sharing gateway in the schedule by means of regulations, constraining the expansion of this gateway to allow information to be shared only with persons that exercise public functions.

Both the Terrorism Act 2000 and the 2019 Act require the Government to consult on the provisions of the codes of practice that are provided to ports and border officers exercising these powers. I am therefore today announcing the publication of the Government’s consultation on:

the draft schedule 3 code of practice; and
draft modifications to the existing schedule 7 code of practice.

A draft of the schedule 3 code was published on 1 November 2018 to support legislative scrutiny of the Bill. There have been a number of changes to this draft to account for amendments made to schedule 3 during the Bill’s passage through the Lords. The existing schedule 7 code has also been updated to reflect the amendments.
made by the 2019 Act and to make the document clearer and more accessible for law enforcement practitioners.

The Government welcome comments on these documents and will consider any representations before a final version of the draft codes is laid before Parliament for approval. The consultation will last a period of six weeks beginning on Monday 25 February and ending on Friday 05 April. Representations can be submitted by e-mail to this address: Schedule3and7codes@homeoffice.gov.uk and a copy of the consultation and both draft codes will be placed in the House Library and an online version will be made available at:


[HCWS1353]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Rough Sleeping

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler):

On 31 January, the annual rough sleeping statistics were published and showed a welcome 2% reduction in the number of rough sleepers.

These figures also showed that the 83 local authority areas that were part of the Rough Sleeping Initiative (RSI) had seen a 23% reduction in rough sleeping. It has come to our attention that the percentage decrease stated should have referred to 19% rather than 23%. The underlying figures remain unchanged, as does the national 2% reduction. The updated statistics release is available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/rough-sleeping-in-england-autumn-2018.

The figures continue to demonstrate that the Rough Sleeping Initiative has had a significant impact on the number of people sleeping rough and is working. That is why we announced a further £45 million for the Rough Sleeping Initiative in 2019-20 as part of the Rough Sleeping strategy. Eleven million pounds of this funding has been set aside for areas that were not part of the initial work of the Rough Sleeping Initiative so that we can build on this work to make sure we continue to support more people off the streets and into safe and secure accommodation.

The comprehensive process for gathering these statistics was, like previous years, run by Homeless Link, the national membership charity for homelessness organisations. Local authorities hold a multi-agency meeting to decide whether to count or estimate rough sleepers in their area and when the chosen date for deciding this figure will be. They are responsible for choosing the method that will most accurately reflect the number of people sleeping rough in their area on a single night. All rough sleeping returns submitted by local authorities are then independently verified or validated by Homeless Link to ensure they are robust. Hundreds of volunteers from homelessness sector organisations as well as local authority staff and people from local communities are involved in this process.

[HCWS1357]

Youth Crime

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire):

Last October, I launched the Supporting Families Against Youth Crime fund to build on the troubled families programme’s proven track record of working with vulnerable families.

This new fund will allow local areas to put a greater focus on working with young people vulnerable to the devastating risks of serious violence. Increasing knife crime, particularly among young people, has been a worrying trend. This fund will bring together keyworkers, community groups, teachers and other professionals to intervene earlier to help stop young people from becoming drawn into gang crime, serious violence and entering the youth justice system.

I am pleased to announce that, in response to the quality of the bids we received, I have decided to increase the fund from £5 million to £9.8 million, which will fund projects in 21 areas across the country, including 10 in London.

The projects receiving funding include those focused on working with children before they make the important transition from primary to secondary school as this is a time when children are particularly vulnerable to becoming involved in crime. Other projects will work with smaller groups of young people already at high risk and carry out in-depth work with parents, carers and professionals to help them understand the risk factors and the dangers of their children being exposed to gang culture.

Many young people across the country are vulnerable to serious violence and youth crime and have experienced childhood trauma which has affected their mental health, resilience, confidence and decision making. For that reason, I am also making workforce development funding available to all other authorities delivering the troubled families programme to contribute to training staff in trauma-informed approaches, emotional coaching and non-violent resolution practices which will better enable them to identify and support these young people.

This new fund is a contribution to a wider package of reforms and funding. The Government’s serious violence strategy set out the trends and drivers behind the increases in serious violence and a major programme of work. Importantly, it talks about the benefits of intervening early and with a multi-agency response, something on which the troubled families programme has a proven track record. Learning from these projects will be shared across Government to support the development of future policies.

The full list of areas receiving funding can be found here:


[HCWS1359]
Written Statements
Tuesday 26 February 2019

CABINET OFFICE
No-deal EU Exit Implications

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): On 14 February 2019, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), made a commitment in the House that I would meet with the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (right hon. Anna Soubry) on behalf of the Government, to identify information to be published relating to the implications for trade and business of a no-deal exit from the European Union on 29 March 2019.

These discussions have now taken place. In the light of these discussions, I am depositing in the Libraries of both Houses the following document: “Implications for Trade and Business of a No Deal Exit from the European Union on 29 March 2019”.

This document summarises Government activity to prepare for no deal as a contingency plan, and provides an assessment of the implications of a no-deal exit for trade and businesses, given the preparations that have been made.

The Government’s primary aim remains to ensure that the UK leaves the EU on 29 March with a negotiated deal which will honour the result of the referendum. However, as a responsible Government, we continue to plan for all eventualities. Guidance for businesses and citizens on how to prepare for a no-deal scenario can be found on the Government’s exit guidance website at: www.gov.uk/government/brexit.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE
Prespa Agreement and North Macedonia’s NATO Accession

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): Her Majesty’s Government have received by note verbale a formal notice from the Government in Skopje that the Republic of Macedonia has changed its name to the Republic of North Macedonia. This follows the entering into force of the Prespa agreement. The UK body that deals with geographical names, the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (PCGN), recommended that we endorse the change. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs agreed.

The name issue

The name issue had been a matter of dispute between Macedonia and Greece since 1991, when Greece refused to recognise the new state as the “Republic of Macedonia” owing to sensitivities over use of the term Macedonia. The Republic of Macedonia became the 181st member of the United Nations, but under the provisional term, the “former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”. Until the Prespa agreement came into force, this was the designation used by the country in all international fora. In bilateral communications, the United Kingdom referred to the country by its constitutional name, the ‘Republic of Macedonia’.

The Prespa agreement

Under the auspices of the United Nations, negotiating teams from both countries reached a settlement. The Foreign Ministers of Greece and Macedonia signed the Prespa agreement on 17 June 2018. The entering into force of the Prespa agreement earlier this month resolves the dispute. Under Article 1 (3) of the agreement, the Republic of Macedonia is henceforth the Republic of North Macedonia.

NATO Accession

NATO Allies, including the United Kingdom, signed North Macedonia’s Accession protocol on 6 February. Greece’s Parliament ratified North Macedonia’s NATO Accession Protocol on 8 February. The Greek Government then confirmed to the Macedonian Government that all necessary steps to ratify the Prespa agreement were complete. Her Majesty’s Government are taking forward the process for UK ratification of North Macedonia’s NATO Accession Protocol. This will involve laying the Accession Protocol before Parliament for 21 sitting days for scrutiny (as stipulated in the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010). Once this process is complete, and provided Parliament has no objections, Her Majesty’s Government will deposit their instrument of ratification.
written statements

wednesday 27 february 2019

international development

jordan: growth and opportunity—the london initiative 2019

the secretary of state for international development (penny mordaunt): i wish to update on the london initiative, a major international conference that the uk and jordan will co-host here in london on thursday 28 february 2019. the event will convene senior leaders from international governments and the private sector, and will champion jordan’s ambitious plans for economic transformation as set out within king abdullah’s vision 2025.

jordan’s stability is inextricable from the uk’s global interests. the uk sees jordan as a key ally, an island of stability at the heart of a turbulent middle east, and a partner with whom we have enjoyed a mutually supportive relationship for over a century. jordan’s stability matters to the region; it has been a long-time host to the victims of its neighbours’ conflicts—some 670,000 refugees of the syria crisis have made their home in jordan. and it matters to the uk. jordan has similarly played host to approximately 6,000 uk troops annually for essential training. jordan matters as a stable buffer against encroaching threats posed by malign influences within the region. it was through the vital use of jordan’s airspace that 5,000 uk aircraft flew in the fight against daesh.

but jordan’s resilience is being tested—not just by the influx of refugees from syria that it has sheltered with characteristic generosity, but also by long-standing economic challenges which have exacerbated some 670,000 refugees of the syria crisis have made their home in jordan. and it matters to the uk. jordan has similarly played host to approximately 6,000 uk troops annually for essential training. jordan matters as a stable buffer against encroaching threats posed by malign influences within the region. it was through the vital use of jordan’s airspace that 5,000 uk aircraft flew in the fight against daesh.

jordan’s efforts against these factors have been valiant. successive governments have implemented vigorous fiscal adjustments to rein in the size of the public deficit, at times testing the boundaries of the social contract which has held jordan together since its independence in 1946. and yet, despite apparent political costs, jordan has persevered, demonstrating a resounding commitment to economic transformation. and not without success—exports increased in 2018, supported by the re-opening of the border with iraq, while tourism has grown strongly, and credit to the private sector has grown at solid rates for the third consecutive year. however, jordan faces these challenges, the success of its new fiscal policies and macroeconomic reforms still relies on the backing of the international donor community and an upsurge in interest from international businesses.

in november 2017, the prime minister announced in amman that the uk would be entering into a new long-term partnership to support and strengthen jordan’s resilience in line with hm king abdullah ii’s vision 2025 for economic transformation. the partnership is framed as a 10-year long relationship between the uk and jordan recognising jordan’s importance to the uk today and offering a “whole of government” effort to support the country’s resilience. this is why we are holding the london initiative, an international conference that will rally the international development and finance communities around a new approach to supporting jordan; an approach that pivots the uk’s support for jordan away from humanitarian-focused grants and towards developing sustainable economic growth, led by private sector investment and helping jordan to continue to provide for its population, including its young people, women and refugees. that is not to say that the uk’s humanitarian support for jordan ends here. the uk remains committed to its humanitarian support for jordan, including to syrian refugees, recognising the increased pressure a rising population puts on community services. however, the conference will rally the donor community around a new model for engagement in jordan—one in which jordan’s advances in reforms will unlock greater international financial support.

the london initiative will offer an opportunity for the government of jordan to demonstrate its commitment to economic transformation on an international platform, and will present jordan credibly to international businesses as an opportunity for investment. in return, we will deploy an integrated uk “whole of government” approach, providing technical expertise and establishing peer to peer partnerships from a range of uk government departments. for example, hmrc is already working with the government of jordan’s income sales and tax department to design new methods of limiting tax avoidance, exposing tax havens, and improving data collection to better identify leakages in the jordanian system; and the department for education, the department for business, energy and industrial strategy, and the bank of england have additionally offered partnerships of their own. but the london initiative will also be a global approach. in keeping with global britain, we, the uk, will use the full extent of our convening power to leverage global financial and policy backing behind jordan’s reform vision.

jordan is ambitiously transforming its economic model, reforming its labour, and taking the right steps to encourage vigorous private sector growth. at the core of its objectives, the london initiative sets out to champion the progress already made in all of these areas.

first, the initiative will be the driving force for the government of jordan to present a robust and realistic strategy for unlocking economic growth, underpinned by practical demonstration of its commitment to a package of necessary macroeconomic reforms, including those aimed at attracting private sector investment and increasing women’s participation in the workplace. secondly, the initiative will invite partners, including the g7 and gcc countries, to promise collective political backing for this vision, following the uk’s lead on an initiative linking aid to reform implementation and unlocking larger volumes of concessional and private finance. finally, the initiative will also be a showcase for some of jordan’s most exciting, investment-ready sectors—particularly tourism, infrastructure, ict and professional services—which british businesses are already benefitting.
Britain, as a trading nation, relies on strong markets to thrive and through this conference, we are helping support an important ally’s stability whilst building a market of the future. The event will initiate new public-private dialogues championing the Government of Jordan’s pipeline of infrastructure projects ready for investment, new funding vehicles to assist their financing, and their commitment to investment climate and ease of doing business reforms.

As well as bringing together CEOs, international investors and Heads of State from around the world, the conference needs to have an impact that reaches the ordinary people on the streets of Jordan. In particular, it must provide opportunities for women and young people. Jordan’s young, educated and aspirational population has helped position the country as a pioneer in ICT, start-ups and creative industries. All of these, alongside the Government’s commitment to reforms, are reasons to invest in Jordan.

The London initiative on 28 February will be a staging post within the UK-Jordan partnership and the starting point of a long-term growth trajectory that will increase foreign investment and create high-quality jobs for all Jordanians. It should also provide a tangible demonstration of the UK’s leadership on the international stage and will be one of the clearest examples of the potential of global Britain.

Jordan matters to the UK and is a natural partner for a global Britain, a steadfast ally on the frontline of conflict and instability. The conference will be a demonstration of our strong relationship and will pioneer a new model for development in a vulnerable middle-income country, anchored squarely in UK national interest.

[HCWS1363]

TRANSPORT

Banning Old Tyres: Consultation

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): Colleagues across the House will be aware of the potential dangers posed by ageing tyres. In that context I would like to update the House further about potential changes to legislation that the Government are proposing to improve the safety of buses, coaches, heavy goods vehicles and minibuses.

This country has one of the best road safety records in the world. But over 1,700 people were killed last year on UK roads, and we are determined to improve the UK’s road safety record still further. In my written statement to the House on the 13 June 2018 I reported on the progress made toward the ambitious goals listed in the Government’s 2015 road safety statement.

Penalties for using mobile phones while driving have been increased and commitments for police funding to tackle drug driving have been exceeded. Learner drivers can now gain valuable experience of motorway driving when accompanied by an instructor in a car with dual controls.

We are pioneering new mobile breathalyser technologies, supporting the use of photographic and video evidence in police enforcement, and going further than ever before in investigating the causes of road collisions.

However, in recent years the safety of older tyres on heavy vehicles has become a matter of serious concern to my Department, and to this House. This followed a tragic coach crash in 2012 in which three people from the wider Liverpool area lost their lives. Mrs Frances Molloy, whose son Michael was one of those killed, has campaigned unceasingly for a ban on the use of older tyres on buses and coaches.

She has been vigorously supported by the hon Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), who has highlighted this issue in a number of parliamentary questions, and tabled a Private Members’ Bill on this subject on several occasions.

Responding to public concerns, in 2013 my Department provided guidance to all bus and coach operators on how to establish the age of the tyres on their vehicles, and against the use of tyres more than 10 years old on the steering axles of those vehicles. This was updated and extended in 2016.

The Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency has also been monitoring compliance with the guidance on age: since June 2017 they have inspected 156,263 buses and coaches and found 82 to be non-compliant. I am pleased to say that this represents a non-compliance rate of 0.06% —that is, less than one tenth of 1% of over a 100,000 vehicles inspected.

But I, with the full support of the Secretary of State, have been determined to go further. In May 2018, in response to evidence that emerged from a collision investigation, the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency introduced a change to roadworthiness requirements for tyres. In my written statement to this House on 23 November 2018 I announced further measures to address non-compliance with the tyre age guidance, and provide the basis for the Traffic Commissioner to intervene in cases of non-compliance.

Importantly, this guidance also covered the misuse of older tyres not only on buses and coaches, but on all heavy motor vehicles and heavy trailers.

A key constraint on this work has been the absence of robust and objective evidence as to the effect of age on tyre integrity. But we have addressed this issue too. In March 2018 I reported to the House that I had commissioned specialist research to investigate changes in the characteristics of tyres based on their age. I am pleased to tell the House that the investigative element of this pioneering work is complete, and we expect to report on the overall findings later in the spring.

Yesterday in the Coroner’s court there was another awful case involving an old burst tyre which cost the lives of several people. Independent experts came together to testify that here too age was a factor. Their analysis fits with the Department’s own emerging body of evidence.

The Government now intend to consult on options to ban older tyres on heavy vehicles, including legislation that could make it illegal for buses, coaches, heavy goods vehicles, and minibuses to have tyres more than 10 years old. We also intend to extend this consultation to taxis and private hire vehicles. Subject to consultation, we would expect antique and heritage vehicles to be exempt.

I would like to pay tribute to Mrs Molloy, to the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood, and to all involved in the Tyred campaign. Road safety affects us all, often in the most direct and personal and distressing way. As this legislation underlines, this Government are committed to ensuring that the UK continues to have some of the safest roads in the world.

[HCWS1362]
Written Statements

Thursday 28 February 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Capacity Market for Electricity

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Last week I informed the House that the European Commission had moved on to the next phase in their investigation of the GB capacity market. This is an important first step in restoring state aid approval for the capacity market as soon as possible.

On 19 December 2018, the Government consulted on a range of changes to the capacity market. These changes would allow for a capacity market auction to be held later this year for delivery in 2019-20. The consultation also covered how existing agreements would be managed during the current standstill period.

The Government have today published a response to that consultation. The vast majority of respondents supported the proposals to allow for an auction for capacity for winter 2019-20 to be held, with payments conditional on a positive state aid approval. They also supported the consequential changes to milestones required as a result of the auction being held later in the year than usual. There was also support for the proposed changes to the management of existing agreements to ensure that scheme obligations continue to be enforced in a pragmatic and proportionate way.

In the light of these responses I can confirm that the Government have today laid draft regulations for the approval of the House to enable these changes to be made to allow an auction to be held in summer 2019.

In our consultation, we also covered the issue of how suppliers can make provisions for suspended payments. In their response to the consultation, capacity market agreement holders identified the importance of them having confidence that they will receive their suspended payments in full after the end of the standstill period. They therefore favoured suppliers making adequate provision to make these payments. We have considered the consultation responses carefully and considered how to ensure that we can deliver this ambition in the most effective and timely way.

I can therefore confirm that the Electricity Settlements Company will establish a system to facilitate suppliers’ meeting their supplier charge liabilities during the standstill period. The inclusion of supplier charges within the price cap already means that all suppliers should be factoring this into their variable tariffs during the standstill period and making prudent provision to enable them to be paid immediately after the end of the standstill period. During the standstill period, the Electricity Settlements Company will:

- issue a schedule of post-standstill supplier charges on a monthly basis setting out their liabilities apportioned according to the current formula based on suppliers’ demand in 2018-19.
- This will enable suppliers to manage their finances effectively;
- accept payments against that schedule in an interest-bearing account.

Ofgem will continue monitoring the financial resilience of suppliers, including to understand how any suppliers that are not paying into the Electricity Settlements Company system are making suitable provision to cover their supplier charge liabilities.

Following the end of the standstill period the Electricity Settlements Company will:
- invoice suppliers at the earliest opportunity for the full amount of outstanding supplier charges;
- work with Ofgem to use a range of tools, including enforcement under the regulations, to ensure prompt payment of this invoice;
- levy, in line with the existing regulations, interest on late payments;
- pay capacity agreement holders their outstanding capacity payments in full.

We will shortly consult on regulatory changes that will be required to hold a T-3 auction in early 2020.

[HCWS1372]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

EU Environment Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The next EU Environment Council will take place on 5 March, in Brussels. I will be attending to represent the UK, and the Scottish Minister for Rural Affairs and Natural Environment, Mairi Gougeon MSP, will also attend.

On environment items, the main legislative focus will be a general approach on the drinking water directive. In addition, there will also be an exchange of views on greening the European semester, and a policy debate on the European Union framework on endocrine disruptors.

The primary focus for climate items will be a policy debate entitled a “Clean planet for all: Strategic long-term vision for a climate neutral economy”.

Any other business (AOB) will include information from the Commission on three items:

- Better enforcement of the EU phasedown for hydrofluorocarbons;
- Proposal for a regulation in order to take appropriate account of the global data collection system for ship fuel oil consumption data;
- Intersessional Espoo meeting of the parties, Geneva, 5 to 7 February 2019.

There are currently three member state led AOBs:

- Environmental protection policies to combat depopulation in rural areas and to improve quality of life (tabled by Spain);
- Tackling greenhouse gas emissions by aviation pricing (tabled by Belgium);
- Preparation of the XXI conference of the parties to the Barcelona convention, for the protection of the marine environment and the coastal area of the Mediterranean, hosted by Italy in Naples from 2 to 5 December 2019 (tabled by Italy).

[HCWS1367]
EXCLUDING THE EUROPEAN UNION

EU General Affairs Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Lord Callanan, Minister of State for Exiting the European Union, has made the following statement:

I represented the UK at the General Affairs Council (GAC) meeting on 19 February in Brussels. A provisional report of the meeting and the conclusions adopted can be found on the Council of the European Union’s website at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/gac/2019/02/19/.

Multiannual financial framework 2021-27

The presidency presented Ministers with an updated work programme on the multiannual financial framework (MFF) for 2021-27. Ministers discussed the latest version of the negotiating box on the MFF. The negotiating box brings together the large number of decisions within the MFF negotiations, and facilitates discussion on options and solutions on individual issues. Ministers agreed that the negotiating box should be simplified at future GAC discussions, in preparation for leaders to discuss at the June European Council. The intention is to reach an agreement on the negotiations in autumn 2019.

Preparation of the European Council 21 and 22 March 2019: annotated draft agenda

The Council discussed an annotated draft agenda for the March European Council. Leaders are expected to discuss negotiations, and facilitates discussion on options and solutions on individual issues. Ministers agreed that the negotiating box should be simplified at future GAC discussions, in preparation for leaders to discuss at the June European Council. The intention is to reach an agreement on the negotiations in autumn 2019.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

EU Foreign Affairs Council

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, attended the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) on 18 February. It was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union (EU) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP), Federica Mogherini. The meeting was held in Brussels.

Current Affairs

Foreign Ministers welcomed the entry into force of the Prespa agreement which allows for the change of name of North Macedonia. They briefly discussed the situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Horn of Africa

The High Representative informed Ministers about her visit to the region the previous week. Foreign Ministers welcomed the historic Ethiopia–Eritrea peace agreement. They discussed how the EU can support this unprecedented opportunity to accelerate reconciliation and economic integration in the horn of Africa. They reaffirmed the EU’s engagement in the region, which still faces important challenges, not least the security situation in Somalia. They also highlighted the need to keep a strong focus on the respect for human rights, as well as on the situation of migrants who embark on perilous journeys, sometimes at a very young age.

Ukraine

The Council had a comprehensive discussion on Ukraine, covering the reform process as well as the security and humanitarian situation, in particular in eastern Ukraine and the sea of Azov. The Council reiterated its full support for Ukraine’s independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty and continued condemnation of the illegal annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol by Russia. Foreign Ministers acknowledged the important progress Ukraine has accomplished in key areas over the past five years and highlighted the need to maintain reform momentum.

The Council also expressed the importance of ensuring that the elections in Ukraine are well conducted. They highlighted the importance of ensuring that the OSCE election observation mission can conduct its work and can observe the elections in full accordance with its usual practice. Ministers exchanged views on how the EU can help, following the developments in the Azov sea and Kerch strait region, particularly through strengthened support in the affected areas, including in sectors such as railway and road connections, training, and support for SMEs. They reiterated the EU’s call for all detained Ukrainian seamen to be released immediately.
as well as for the return of the seized vessels and free passage of all ships through the Kerch straits.

**Syria**

The Council discussed the situation in Syria. Foreign Ministers reiterated the EU's full and continued support for UN special envoy Geir Pedersen's efforts and the Geneva UN-led peace process for Syria, which remains key to the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, citing a credible political transition in Syria as the only sustainable long-term solution to the conflict. Ministers reiterated that the EU will be ready to assist in the reconstruction of Syria only when a comprehensive, genuine and inclusive political transition is firmly under way.

Ministers discussed preparations for the “Brussels III” conference “Supporting the future of Syria and the region”, which will take place on 12 to 14 March, and remains key to continue mobilising the international community behind humanitarian and resilience efforts for the Syrian people and host communities. The High Representative highlighted that the conference would have an even greater focus on the role of civil society and women, and that the issues of accountability and the fight against immunity will feature prominently.

**Venezuela**

Over lunch, Foreign Ministers discussed the situation in Venezuela, following the first meeting of the international contact group in Montevideo on 7 February and ahead of the technical mission to Caracas led by the EU and Uruguay. The mission will work on assessing the support that can be provided to facilitate a democratic and peaceful outcome to the crisis, and, in particular, the holding of early presidential elections. Foreign ministers also stressed that humanitarian aid should be delivered to the people in need.

**Council conclusions**

The Council agreed a number of measures without discussion:

- The Council adopted conclusions on Yemen.
- The Council adopted conclusions on climate diplomacy.
- The Council renewed for one year the restrictive measures against Zimbabwe. The sanctions consist of an arms embargo as well as a travel ban and an asset freeze to listed individuals and entities.
- The Council added one person to the list of persons and entities targeted by the EU restrictive measures against ISIL (Daesh) and al-Qaeda and persons, groups, undertakings and entities associated with them, bringing the total number of persons currently on the list to three.
- The Council transposed UN-adopted law amendments, related to two individuals subject to restrictive measures, into EU law, in view of the situation in Afghanistan.
- The Council approved and authorised the signing of an agreement on a framework for the participation of Jordan in EU crisis management operations.
- The Council approved the updated EU’s common military list in line with the provisions of common position 2008/944/CFSP on arms exports.
- The Council approved a joint civil-military concept of operations on regionalisation of CSDP action in the Sahel. The process of regionalisation will now enter its second phase.
- The Council authorised the Commission to intervene on behalf of the EU before US courts regarding the recognition and enforcement of intra-EU investment arbitration awards.

The Council endorsed a framework for a comprehensive dialogue between the EU and Iran on migration and refugee issues (5983/19).

The Council adopted a decision on the UK opt-out from the recast of the regulation on the creation of an immigration liaison officers network (5979/19).

The Council approved an information note containing recommended EU positions for the ICAO Council meeting on 18 February to 15 March 2019, so that the information note can be used as the basis for the interventions of the representatives of the ICAO Council EU members.

The Council adopted a decision on the position to be taken on behalf of the EU in the ICAO Council, in respect of the adoption of amendment 17 to annex 13.

**HOME DEPARTMENT**

**Police Equipment**

The **Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd):** The Government are committed to giving the police the tools they need to do their job effectively and ensuring that officers’ access to specialist equipment such as conducted energy devices (CEDs), commonly known as Tasers, can remain aligned with police assessments of threat and risk. CEDs are an important tactical option for specially trained officers, particularly in potentially violent situations where other tactics have been considered or failed.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has today given his approval for chief officers of police forces in England and Wales to train selected student officers to carry CEDs where they have identified an operational need to do so. It is for chief officers to determine the number of CED devices and specially trained officers they require, based on their force’s strategic threat and risk assessment. This change allows chief officers to consider student officers for CED training and deployment, provided they have met certain selection criteria, to help ensure frontline officers can protect themselves and the public.

I would like to assure the House that the existing high standards around CED training and operational deployment, for which the UK is renowned, will be maintained. It will remain voluntary whether an individual student officer applies for special CED training, and the CED training itself will remain the same—with the same standards needing to be met for a student officer to pass the assessment.

Additional safeguards have been put into place for the extension of CED use to student officers. Only student officers who have been assessed by supervisors to be sufficiently competent and experienced in dealing with incidents involving conflict will be able to apply for CED training. The College of Policing has developed a robust application framework for student constables which sets this out, including a post-use process to support continued officer development. Details of this proposal were submitted for independent medical review by the scientific advisory committee on the medical implications of less-lethal weapons (SACMILL).

The Home Secretary’s decision to approve this measure follows stringent consideration of a number of factors including: the request for approval from the National
Police Chiefs’ Council (NPCC), the College of Policing’s application and post-use development framework and the views of SACMILL.

We are also clear that any use of force by police officers must be lawful, proportionate and reasonable in the circumstances. The Government are committed to improving transparency and accountability around use of force. This is why we initiated reforms to the way in which use of force data is recorded and published. On 13 December 2018, the Home Office published national “police use of force” statistics on gov.uk for the first time—providing unprecedented transparency and accountability. In addition, I expect any police forces who decide to extend CED use to student officers to monitor the impact of this change, including local consideration of injury data.

[HCWS1369]

Children in Custodial Institutions

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): Today the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse has published its latest strand report, which can be found at www.iicsa.org.uk.

This report relates to its investigation into the extent of any institutional failures to protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation while in custodial institutions. I am grateful for the strength and courage of the victims and survivors who have shared their experiences to ensure the inquiry can deliver its vital work.

The Government will review this report and consider how to respond to its content in due course.

I would like to thank Professor Jay and her panel for their continued work to uncover the truth, expose what went wrong in the past and to learn the lessons for the future.

[HCWS1371]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

EU Exit: Free Trade Agreements

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): Today, I am laying a Command Paper—“Processes for making free trade agreements after the United Kingdom has left the European Union” (CM 63) before Parliament.

The Government are committed to ensuring that Parliament can conduct the right level of scrutiny of our future trade agreements. We have considered carefully the views expressed by parliamentarians in reaching the proposals set out in the Command Paper. This includes the recommendations made by the International Trade Committee in their report “UK trade policy, transparency and public scrutiny”, which was published on 28 December 2018.

The Government’s response to that report will be published shortly.

I will be laying this report in both Houses today and it will be available on DIT’s website at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/processes-for-making-free-trade-agreements-once-the-uk-has-left-the-eu.

[HCWS1364]

Government Procurement Agreement

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): I wish to update the House on the progress made in securing the UK’s continued participation in the WTO agreement on Government procurement (GPA) as we leave the EU. Yesterday in Geneva, the 19 parties to the GPA formally adopted the decision relating to the UK’s accession to the agreement as a party in its own right. The GPA committee decision on the UK’s accession refers to both the scenario where the UK and EU reach a deal on the terms of the UK’s withdrawal, and one in which the UK is to leave the EU with no deal. If the UK leaves the EU without a deal, the UK will ratify the agreement as soon as possible, once the process set out in section 20 of the Constitutional Reform and Governance (CRaG) Act 2010 completes. This will ensure that our membership of the GPA—an agreement worth £1.3 trillion annually—continues, as now, in a no deal scenario.

Should the withdrawal agreement be agreed between the EU and UK, a further decision of the GPA committee would be required to allow for UK accession at the end of the implementation period, but the GPA would continue to apply to the UK as if it were a member state of the EU during that implementation period. Leaving the EU with a deal remains the Government’s top priority. This has not changed.

Yesterday’s decision is a significant milestone for the UK, and it will ensure UK suppliers can continue to bid for Government contracts overseas on substantially the same terms as currently provided to the UK as an EU member state. It will also ensure that the UK continues to benefit from increased choice and value for money in areas where the UK’s procurement opportunities are open to international competition, whilst importantly continuing to protect vital public services such as our NHS.

The Government have already begun the process set out in section 20 of the CRaG Act 2010 for Parliamentary scrutiny of the agreement. The agreement was laid before both Houses of Parliament on 18 February. This includes text of the agreement, the UK’s market access schedules—consistent with our current offer as an EU member state—and the market access schedules of all parties, alongside accompanying explanatory memoranda.

In a no deal Brexit scenario, the Government are anticipating a short gap between the UK leaving the EU and its accession to the GPA becoming effective. This is to allow for the completion of the necessary processes that allow for a new GPA accession to become legally effective. The gap is expected to be very short and, as a result, the Government are expecting the impact on UK businesses to be minimal.

[HCWS1365]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland Finances

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): During the course of the past two years the UK Government have continued to work towards the restoration of a devolved Government. I remain fully committed to seeing this happen as my belief in the
Belfast agreement and devolution is resolute as is my commitment to protecting the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland.

A fundamental part of this is to protect the delivery of public services and ensure good governance in the absence of an Executive. I am, therefore, providing clarity and certainty on Northern Ireland finances for the 2019-20 financial year. This would enable Northern Ireland Departments to plan and prepare for the year ahead.

2019-20 Budget allocations

I set out below the resource and capital allocations which I consider to be the most balanced and appropriate settlement for Northern Ireland Departments. It would be open to a restored Executive, of course, to consider and revise the position I have set out.

In deciding on these allocations I have engaged intensively with the Northern Ireland civil service (NICS) to understand the needs of Departments as they continue to manage public services in the absence of an Executive. I have reflected too on the various views on budget priorities submitted to me over the course of the past year and discussed the budget situation with the main political parties in Northern Ireland.

As we work towards restoring devolved government, this Government will respect the devolution settlement and only intervene in Northern Ireland when it is absolutely necessary to do so. In the absence of local Ministers, and given the proximity of the next financial year, it would not be appropriate for the UK Government to seek to take fundamental decisions about service delivery and transformation. Those are strategic decisions that should be taken by locally elected and accountable Ministers in a new devolved Government. Yet we must act to secure public services and enable Northern Ireland Departments to meet urgent pressures in health and education and protect spending for other Departments with core frontline public services. That is what this budget settlement will do, by protecting and preserving public services within challenging fiscal constraints.

On the resource side, it delivers real-terms increases for health, education, infrastructure and justice. It also delivers cash increases to the Departments for the Economy and of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. Elsewhere Departments would either be cash-flat, with notable reductions only for the two central Departments (Finance and the Executive Office). For capital, it provides a strong basis for investment and enables the York Street interchange to progress as well as key flagship projects including the Mother and Children’s Hospital and the A6 road scheme.

UK Government support

The budget position is based on the assumption that the 2019-20 funding allocation set out in the financial annex to the confidence and supply agreement will be released, subject to Parliament’s approval at main estimates.

Furthermore, in recognition of the lack of opportunity for more fundamental service reconfiguration over the last 12 months, this budget includes £140 million of new funding and some financial flexibilities to deliver this draft budget. These flexibilities include using £130 million of existing 2019-20 capital funding to address public services resource pressures and additional carry forward of up to £85 million resource and £8 million capital from 2018-19 into 2019-20.

Transformation

As I set out last year, transformation is needed in a number of areas to make services sustainable in the long term. Northern Ireland Departments are limited in what strategic decisions can be taken without Northern Ireland Ministers but work to prepare for this must proceed. To that end, the budget includes a £4 million fund to prepare the ground for transformation.

Regional rate

As part of setting a budget, it is essential that the UK Government provide clarity on the regional rate. This budget position has been constructed on the basis of a 3% (plus inflation) increase on the domestic regional rate, and 0% plus inflation on business rates. I consider that this is a necessary and important step to continue to support public services, particularly in health and education. I can also confirm that this budget settlement would provide the basis for the small business rate relief to continue.

Brexit preparedness

Securing a deal with the EU which Parliament can support remains this Government’s focus and priority. As a responsible Government, we are preparing for EU exit in all scenarios and so have allocated £2 billion in 2019-20 to support Departments and devolved Administrations in either a deal or no-deal scenario. For Northern Ireland Departments this includes £20.4 million of general EU exit funding that is allocated in this budget and a further £16.5 million for the Police Service of Northern Ireland (included in the Department of Justice’s allocation) to reflect the specific and unique circumstances in Northern Ireland.

Implementing decisions within the overall allocations

This statement outlines overall allocations, based on my assessment of the options currently available to the Northern Ireland Departments and the funding available. To the extent possible, the consequent prioritisation of resources within Northern Ireland Departments will need to be undertaken by permanent secretaries, as has been the case during the past two years. It is anticipated that further funding will become available through the usual in-year monitoring process and this should enable Departments to address any remaining pressures. Permanent secretaries cannot, of course, take the full range of decisions that would be available to Ministers. In that context, the UK Government shall continue to support the Northern Ireland Administration, and to do whatever is necessary to meet our responsibilities to the people of Northern Ireland.

Attachments can be viewed online at: https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2019-02-28/HCWS1370/.
[HCWS1370]
Our modern industrial strategy is creating a fairer and more equal workplace, to boost productivity and earning power for all. Our proposals support this by helping to create a more level playing field between workers and employers, providing more understanding over rights and legal responsibilities.


I am placing copies of the consultation in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1373]
As part of this work to protect vulnerable people, I would like to stress the Government’s commitment to ensuring those who receive housing support are able to access the properties they need. Our latest figures show that around half of landlords said they would not be willing to let to tenants on Housing Benefit—ruling out thousands of vulnerable people and families. As the Prime Minister recently stated, we have already started working with Shelter following their campaign raising awareness of so-called ‘No DSS’ adverts. Over the coming months, Ministers will meet with industry representatives including mortgage providers, landlord associations, tenant groups and property websites to develop ways to stop the unfair exclusion of tenants in receipt of housing support. This will help us take steps to eradicate this practice and ensure people in receipt of housing support can access the homes they need.

Rapid rehousing pathway 2019-20 funding round

Separately, I have also announced that we are inviting local authorities to apply for the Rapid Rehousing Pathway 2019-20 funding round. This second round of funding invites local authorities to bid for all or any elements of the Rapid Rehousing Pathway which includes Somewhere Safe to Stay hubs, specialist Navigators, Local Lettings Agencies and Supported Lettings. This follows the announcement of a combined 53 ‘early adopter’ areas in December 2018 and February 2019. The link to the applications page can be found here:


Applications for the new funding round will be accepted up to 23:59 on 29 March 2019, and we intend to announce successful bids in the spring.

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Informal Trade Foreign Affairs Council

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery):
The informal EU Foreign Affairs Council (Trade) took place in Bucharest on 21 and 22 February 2019. The formal agenda covered the World Trade Organization (WTO) and EU-US trade. I represented the UK at the meeting. A summary of the discussions follows:

WTO modernisation
Commissioner Malmström highlighted that the risk to the multilateral system was real, but was not sufficiently appreciated by much of the WTO membership.

Discussion focused on the need to keep the US engaged and anchored within the multilateral system while addressing US concerns about the appellate body. I stressed the seriousness of the current situation. Commissioner Malmström mentioned the recent launch of e-commerce negotiations as a positive development.

US trade
Commissioner Malmström said the Commission was focused on delivering the outcomes of the July 2018 Juncker- Trump meeting. She did not know the contents of the US 232 report into cars and reiterated that €20 billion (£17.2 billion) of EU “rebalancing measures” had been prepared. She called on member states to endorse the mandates.

In discussion, the mandates were endorsed by an overwhelming majority of member states. I urged the importance of moving forward at pace, emphasising the significant UK interests. Discussion revolved around timing. The Commission highlighted their commitment to moving forward as quickly as possible. The presidency offered an extraordinary Council meeting if needed to facilitate this.

[HCWS1374]
Written Statements

Tuesday 5 March 2019

NORTHERN IRELAND

Administration of Justice: Impact of Social Media

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): Today I am publishing the Government’s response to the call for evidence on the impact of social media on the administration of justice. The response is available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/response-to-call-for-evidence-on-the-impact-of-social-media-on-the-administration-of-justice, and a copy has also been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

The focus of the call for evidence was to look at the impact of social media on the criminal justice system, with particular attention paid to the issues of active proceedings and breaches of reporting restrictions and anonymity orders.

The evidence was varied and I am grateful to everyone who contributed. We can conclude that, for the moment, social media is not having a widespread impact on the trial process. This, however, may not remain the case if the issues identified are not addressed. The response sets out a number of ways that the Government will respond to the variety of issues raised. This includes improving links with social media companies, which will enable easier removal of harmful posts, and working with cross-Government partners, including the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, on the White Paper on online harms to tackle contempt of court and anonymity orders.

In addition to working on guidance orders, which can be accessed here: https://www.gov.uk, we have created a dedicated webpage to support public understanding of contempt of court and anonymity orders.

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We disagree with this finding and the Home Office has been granted permission to appeal all aspects of the judgment.

In the meantime, the provisions passed by this House in 2014 remain in force. There are no immediate changes to the operation of the policy. Landlords and letting agents are still obliged to conduct right to rent checks as required in legislation. They must not discriminate against anyone on the basis of their colour or where they come from.

As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has previously said, we are looking at options for a further evaluation of the operation of the scheme. As part of this, we will look to develop further mechanisms to monitor the operation of the scheme to provide ongoing assurance about its impact.

The Home Secretary has written to the independent adviser on lessons learned from Windrush, Wendy Williams, to draw her attention to the High Court’s findings.

The review is identifying the key legislative, policy and operational failures which resulted in members of the Windrush generation becoming entangled in measures designed for illegal immigrants.

The Right to Rent Consultative Panel will meet again next month to look at the operation of the scheme and the guidance provided to landlords and letting agents.

The Government are committed to tackling discrimination in all its forms and to having an immigration system which provides control, but which is also fair, humane and fully compliant with the law. This includes ensuring illegal migrants, with no right to be in the UK, are not able to access work, benefits and public services.

In 2016, a requirement was introduced for landlords and letting agents in England to take reasonable steps to check that they are renting only to someone who has a right to do so.

These checks apply equally to everyone seeking to rent property and there are penalties for landlords who fail to complete them and who are later found to have rented to someone without a right to be in the UK.

The law was and remains absolutely clear that discriminatory treatment on the part of anyone carrying out these checks is unlawful. And the right to rent legislation provides for a code of practice which sets out what landlords are expected to do.

The scheme was trialled in the west midlands. This trial was evaluated in full, with the results published in October 2015. They included 539 responses to online surveys, 12 focus groups, 36 one-to-one interviews, and a mystery shopping exercise involving 332 encounters.

The Home Office evaluation found there was no systemic discrimination on the basis of race.

It is therefore disappointing that, on Friday last week, the right to rent scheme was declared incompatible with the European convention on human rights. The High Court ruled that Parliament’s decision to impose right to rent checks is outweighed by the potential for race discrimination by those with the duty to perform the required checks.

We disagree with this finding and the Home Office has been granted permission to appeal all aspects of the judgment.

In the meantime, the provisions passed by this House in 2014 remain in force. There are no immediate changes to the operation of the policy. Landlords and letting agents are still obliged to conduct right to rent checks as required in legislation. They must not discriminate against anyone on the basis of their colour or where they come from.

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[HCWS1377]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Right to Rent Scheme

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): The right to rent scheme was launched to prevent illegal migrants from accessing the private rental sector, and to tackle unscrupulous landlords who exploit vulnerable migrants, sometimes in very poor conditions.

In 2016, a requirement was introduced for landlords and letting agents in England to take reasonable steps to check that they are renting only to someone who has a right to do so.

These checks apply equally to everyone seeking to rent property and there are penalties for landlords who fail to complete them and who are later found to have rented to someone without a right to be in the UK.

The law was and remains absolutely clear that discriminatory treatment on the part of anyone carrying out these checks is unlawful. And the right to rent legislation provides for a code of practice which sets out what landlords are expected to do.

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[HCWS1379]
INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Trade Remedies Authority

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): This Government are committed to ensuring the UK has our own trade remedies function in place by the time we leave the EU.

The Trade Bill contains provisions establishing the Trade Remedies Authority (TRA), while the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Act 2018 (TCBTA) confers trade remedy functions on it. The Trade Bill has completed Committee stage in the House of Lords, and it will begin Report stage on 6 March.

I am pleased to announce that we have today commenced the relevant provisions in the TCBTA and laid secondary legislation giving more detail to the measures set out in the TCBTA, with regards to the trade remedies system. Taken together, these provisions will ensure that the UK has the ability to protect UK industry against injury from unfair trade practices, and unforeseen surges in imports.

The regulations draw from both the relevant WTO agreements (i.e. the general agreement on tariffs and trade, anti-dumping agreement, the agreement on subsidies and countervailing measures and the agreement on safeguards) and are similar in many regards to the EU regulations which have applied throughout our membership of the EU. It therefore follows that the process provided for in these regulations will not be wholly unfamiliar to UK industry, and it will have the certainty of a full suite of legislation in place before we leave the EU; it has previously stressed the importance of having regulations in place sooner rather than later.

In the unlikely scenario that we leave the EU without a deal, it is in the national interest to ensure that the UK has the ability to protect UK industry against injury caused by unfair trade practices or unforeseen surges in imports. To provide this certainty, I have put in place contingency arrangements that will temporarily bring the power in-house, allowing the Department to operate trade remedy functions until the Trade Remedies Authority is legally established via the Trade Bill. The use of transitional powers in the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Act 2018 will modify that Act to ensure the trade remedies investigations directorate within the Department and will carry out investigators, will form the trade remedies investigations directorate within the Department and will carry out investigations using the same guidelines, as far as possible, as those that would apply if the TRA were established.

The regulations will automatically when the TRA is legally established. This will legally establish the TRA, at which Assent. This will legally establish the TRA, at which point the modifications will fall away and the TRA will assume responsibility for investigating cases and making recommendations to the Secretary of State as it considers appropriate.

To minimise disruption, the policies and procedures align to the future function of the TRA as much as possible. The main difference lies in the decision-making process.

When the TRA is established, it will carry out investigations to determine whether there is dumping, subsidy or an unforeseen surge in imports, and whether UK industry has suffered injury as a consequence. If it finds this is the case, it will then consider whether the economic interest test is met before making a recommendation to the Secretary of State to apply a trade remedy measure. The Secretary of State must then consider whether to accept or reject that recommendation. In doing so, the Secretary of State can only reject the recommendation on public interest grounds, and this includes a limited assessment of the TRA’s consideration of the economic interest test. While the system is operated in-house, these distinct roles will not exist and legally the Secretary of State will take on responsibility for all of these decisions. However, the intention is to keep this two-stage process as far as possible and for the TRID to carry out objective and evidence-based investigations, while the Secretary of State will take the final decision on whether to apply measures. Where the Secretary of State decides not to apply measures on public interest grounds, a statement will be laid before the House of Commons explaining the reasons, to ensure transparency.

The contingency provisions rely on transitional powers in section 56 of the TCBTA. These provisions to modify section 13 and schedules 4 and 5 of the TCBTA, together with the secondary legislation (the Trade Remedies (Dumping and Subsidisation) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 and the Trade Remedies (Increase in Imports Causing Serious Injury to UK Producers) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019) made under those powers, bring trade remedy functions that would otherwise be carried out by the TRA in-house until the Trade Bill receives Royal Assent. This will legally establish the TRA, at which point the modifications will fall away and the TRA will assume responsibility for investigating cases and making recommendations to the Secretary of State as it considers appropriate.

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The new function will follow the procedures set out in the legislation. In practical terms, the main difference between the operation of TRID and the TRA relates to the decision-making process. When the TRA is established, it will investigate applications to determine whether there is dumping and/or subsidies or unforeseen surges, and whether UK industry has suffered injury as a consequence. If so, it will apply the economic interest test to determine whether measures are in the wider economic interest of the UK. Where the test is met, the TRA will recommend that measures should be applied, and the Secretary of State will then consider whether to accept or reject that recommendation. In doing so, the Secretary of State can only reject the recommendation on public interest grounds, and this includes a limited assessment of the TRA’s consideration of the economic interest test. While the system is operated in-house, these distinct roles will not exist and legally the Secretary of State will take on responsibility for all of these decisions. However, the intention is to keep this two-stage process as far as possible and for the TRID to carry out objective and evidence-based investigations, while the Secretary of State will take the final decision on whether to apply measures. Where the Secretary of State decides not to apply measures on public interest grounds, a statement will be laid before the House of Commons explaining the reasons, to ensure transparency.
WORK AND PENSIONS

Health and Disability

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd): I would like to update hon. Members on the speech I will be delivering at Scope this afternoon.

This Government have a clear ambition to support people with health conditions and disabilities into work, where they can, and to live independently. We have already made significant progress but we need to continue to make improvements to better support people with health conditions and disabled people. I am pleased to set out today a number of measures we will implement to make improvements now and in the future to support disabled people and those with health conditions to achieve their aspirations.

We will improve and simplify the customer experience by no longer undertaking regular reviews of personal independence payment (PIP) awards for claimants at or above state pension age unless they tell us their needs have changed.

We will also be transforming the delivery of assessment services. I have established the health transformation programme to undertake the significant task of transitioning the currently separate work capability assessment (WCA) for employment and support allowance and universal credit (UC), and the PIP assessment services into one unified, integrated service from 2021. To support this, we are developing a single digital platform. An integrated approach will allow for a more joined-up claimant experience across these benefits, which takes account of the multiple interactions an individual may have with DWP. We hope that developing our own digital platform will also enable a greater range of assessment providers to compete to help us deliver this important service in the future.

To enable an integrated service, we are extending the contract for the health and disability assessment service (HDAS), which includes the delivery of the WCA, and aligning it to the duration of the extended PIP contracts. This will allow for a safe and stable service now, and as we transition to the new integrated service.

This strategic transformation will also open up new opportunities to improve our functional assessments in the future. For example, we will test whether it is beneficial to claimants requiring face-to-face assessments to offer a single assessment for UC and PIP to capture all the information required for both claims in one appointment, reducing the need for claimants of both benefits to attend multiple appointments.

My Department will be testing how we increase engagement and build a trusted and strong relationship between work coaches and claimants awaiting an assessment in universal credit, and those found to have limited capability for work. Last month, in response to the Work and Pensions Select Committee report on benefits sanctions, the Department agreed to carry out a small test where work coaches start from a point of no conditionality and scale up where appropriate, focusing on what claimants can do. This contrasts with the current approach, which starts at full conditionality and then tailors down accordingly. The Minister for Employment is taking this forward.

We will also be exploring whether we can enhance the mandatory reconsideration process to gather further evidence from claimants and make more accurate decisions sooner. These improvements will make significant progress in better supporting those with health conditions and disabilities, but this is only the start, and we can, and should, go further.

My ambition is to continue this important conversation around the future of support and I will, alongside the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, be regularly engaging with stakeholders to enable ongoing conversations on the future of the health and disability agenda. This includes exploring how the welfare system can better meet the needs of claimants with disabilities and health conditions.

I am also committing to looking at whether the incentives we provide for and the expectations we have of employers are right. We will consult on proposals to encourage and support employers to play their part in helping disabled people and people with health conditions get into work and remain in work, and to improve access to occupational health. We will be seeking stakeholder input, and that of employers and other partners, in to how we make a real difference to the working lives of people with health conditions and disabilities.

In 2017 we made a manifesto commitment to see 1 million more disabled people in work by 2027. In the coming months I want to review this commitment to see if we can make it even more ambitious.

We constantly reflect on how we can improve and know that improvements come from listening to people and adapting. As such, we plan to commission independent research to understand the needs of disabled people to live independent lives and how health and disability benefits can better support them.

[HCWS1376]
Written Statements

Wednesday 6 March 2019

HOME DEPARTMENT

Justice and Home Affairs Pre-Council Statement

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): The EU Justice and Home Affairs Council of Ministers will meet on 7 and 8 March in Brussels. This will be the last JHA Council meeting that the UK will attend as an EU member state. I will represent the UK for Interior day. The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, the right hon. David Gauke MP will represent the UK for Justice day. The Scottish Government Minister, James Wolfe QC, Lord Advocate, will also attend for both days.

Interior Day on 7 March will begin with a policy debate on the proposed regulation to amend the European Border And Coast Guard Regulation. The regulation aims to reinforce the EU’s integrated border management strategy and further protect the external EU borders by providing the European Border and Coast Guard Agency with a standing corps of 10,000 staff with executive powers, dedicated equipment and the remit to act in third countries. This is a Schengen building measure which the UK does not participate in.

There will then be a progress report on negotiations on the package of seven legislative measures constituting the reform of the common European asylum system. The presidency are seeking compromises to enable them to make progress on these measures ahead of the European Parliament elections in May. The UK will only participate in the regulation relating to Eurodac, the EU’s fingerprint database of asylum seekers and irregular migrants.

The presidency will seek an exchange of views on co-operation with third countries on migration following the recent EU–Arab League summit. Over lunch there will be a discussion on achievements and perspectives on Home Affairs activity from 2014-19. I will use these opportunities to note the UK’s contribution to EU JHA activity, and to emphasise the importance of future co-operation between the EU and the UK on these issues.

The Council will then discuss the state of play on the EU’s response to terrorism. Ministers will be asked to consider whether there are any gaps in EU counter-terrorism policy, and whether new legislation or activity is required. I will highlight areas where the UK considers the EU can add value to member states efforts, and emphasise the importance of future co-operation between the EU and the UK to tackle the terrorist threat.

Finally, Ministers will discuss the issue of disinformation in the context of securing free and fair elections. I will intervene to indicate our continued willingness to share examples of UK good practice and expertise in this area post-exit.

Justice day on 8 December will begin with a progress report on the directive on whistleblowing. The presidency will update on trilogue negotiations with the European Parliament on this issue. The UK has concerns about the proportionality of this measure, and has indicated its preference for providing whistleblowers with a choice of reporting channels to support their disclosures.

The presidency will then present the text of the directive on legal representatives for gathering electronic evidence (‘e-evidence’), seeking agreement for a general approach. While the UK has not opted into the regulation (which requires service providers providing services within the EU to preserve or produce electronic data on request from a law enforcement authority of an EU member state), it will be bound by this directive, which obliges the same service providers to designate a legal representative in a member state to comply with requests. The UK supports the e-evidence proposals’ overall aim of enhanced international co-operation on e-evidence and its use in preventing and tackling harms to public security, and is thus content with the provisions in the directive.

The Council will also discuss Council decisions for negotiating mandates with the US for an agreement on cross-border access to e-evidence, and for negotiations on a second additional protocol to the Budapest Convention on cybercrime. The UK will need to decide whether it wishes to opt in to these Council decisions.

The Commission will provide a state of play on the implementation of the European Public Prosecutor’s Office. The UK does not participate in the EPPO.

The Commission will present the results of the 4th monitoring of the code of conduct on tackling illegal hate speech and to underline the importance of the correct implementation of the framework decision on racism and xenophobia to ensure the continued effectiveness of the voluntary co-operation under the code of conduct as well as of the need to ensure that the offenders of illegal hate speech are brought to justice.

Over lunch, Ministers will discuss the impact of lawtech and artificial intelligence in the Justice System.

Seasonal Workers Pilot

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): On 6 September last year, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and I announced that our Departments would implement a nationwide pilot to enable non-EU migrant workers to work on UK farms, commencing in early 2019 (HCWS940).

We are now pleased to announce that the seasonal workers pilot will commence operation on Wednesday 6 March 2019.

The seasonal workers pilot will operate in the edible horticulture sector, to support farmers growing UK fruit and vegetables. This is the sector of agriculture which has been experiencing the most severe seasonal labour shortages, and which the pilot aims to support.

The horticulture sector is of course a particular UK success story, with soft fruit production having grown by 131% in the last 20 years. Seasonal migrant labour has played an important role in helping soft fruit farmers to grow, sell and export more great British food. We therefore believe that it is the right sector to host this pilot.

This pilot will enable growers to employ up to 2,500 non-EU migrant workers for seasonal work for up to 6 months. We anticipate that the first workers will start to arrive in the UK before the end of April.
Two scheme operators—Concordia and Pro-Force—have been licensed to manage the pilot and will be responsible for identifying suitable migrant workers and matching them to UK growers. They will also be required to ensure the welfare of migrant workers whilst they are in the UK. We will be working closely with the scheme operators and the gangmasters and labour abuse authority to ensure that work rights of participating migrant workers are protected.

This is a UK-wide pilot and we have placed a specific duty on the scheme operators to ensure that all regions of the UK are able to benefit.

The pilot will run until the end of December 2020 and will be monitored closely by the Home Office and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.
Written Statements

Thursday 7 March 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Offshore Wind Sector Deal

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): As part of the industrial strategy, the Government are committed to continue to work closely with the offshore wind industry to further drive down the costs of clean power, while building a competitive UK supply chain.

Offshore wind is a huge UK success story, with the world’s largest offshore wind market and 8 GW of operational capacity (rising to 14 GW by 2023). Long-term Government support has underpinned growth and technological innovation in the sector, leading to significant cost reductions and resulting in offshore wind becoming one of the cheapest low carbon generation sources.

As a key part of our modern industrial strategy, sector deals bring industry and the Government together in partnership to boost productivity and earning power in specific sectors. The offshore wind sector deal sets out an ambitious partnership between Government and industry that will ensure the UK continues to play a leading role in the global market for offshore wind, and that UK companies capitalise on the opportunities of this growing export market; delivering on the industrial strategy’s clean growth grand challenge.

The development of the deal was led by the Offshore Wind Industry Council in close engagement with offshore wind developers, major equipment manufacturers, the wider supply chain in the UK and local communities with an interest in the success of the sector. This reflects on the excellent existing collaboration between the industry, the UK Government, and local, regional and devolved partners, who supported the formation of this deal. It follows ambitious sector deals with the life sciences, automotive, construction, creative industries, artificial intelligence, nuclear, aerospace and rail sectors.

The deal will build on the United Kingdom’s global leadership in offshore wind by growing the UK supply chain, increasing its competitiveness and productivity, taking advantage of new technology and developing the innovative products and services needed in the future. It will do this by:

Providing forward visibility of future contracts for difference auctions with support of up to £557 million, with the next auction to open by May 2019 and subsequent auctions around every 2 years thereafter.¹

The sector committing to increase UK content to 60% by 2030, including increases in the capital expenditure phase.

Increasing the representation of women in the offshore wind workforce to at least a third by 2030, with an ambition to reach a higher figure of 40%.

Setting an ambition of increasing exports fivefold to £2.6 billion by 2030.

The sector investing up to £250 million of funding to establish a new offshore wind growth partnership to work with UK businesses and SMEs to address the UK’s productivity gap, increase business competitiveness, drive supply chain innovation and support the UK’s export drive.

Working to integrate offshore wind to support grid integration, such as co-located storage and wind to hydrogen.

Furthermore, the deal aims to bolster regional clusters in alignment with the industrial strategy’s aim to support prosperous communities throughout the UK. The offshore wind sector will continue to co-ordinate its approach and work with local, regional and devolved Governments and their economic development agencies to build on the opportunities created by this deal, through local industrial strategies in England, and city and growth deals across the UK.

Constructing up to 30 GW of offshore wind by 2030 and boosting exports to £2.6 billion per annum will bring new jobs and economic growth; the sector expects to grow its skilled workforce to 27,000 by 2030, creating opportunities across the UK. The sector aims to employ women as more than a third of its workforce by 2030 and a stretching ambition will be set for raising BAME representation, with the sector committing to initiatives for including people with diverse backgrounds, perspectives and needs, which include age, ethnicity, education and other abilities.

This deal will support the offshore wind industry into the next phase of its development as a world leading industry. I will be placing a copy of this document in the Libraries of both Houses.

¹ Depending on the prices achieved, this could deliver up to 30 GW of offshore wind by 2030.

CABINET OFFICE

Committee on Standards in Public Life: Intimidation in Public Life

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): In July 2017 the Committee on Standards in Public Life was asked by the Prime Minister to conduct a review of intimidation experienced by parliamentary candidates, including those who stood at the 2017 general election. The Committee also considered the broader implications for other candidates for public office and public office holders. Its report, “Intimidation in Public Life”, was published in December 2017.

In March 2018 the Government published their response to the Committee on Standards in Public Life’s report. We thank the Committee for its work on the report which makes sobering reading. In that response, we committed to a series of actions based on the Committee’s recommendations, and today I wish to update Parliament on the work the Government have taken since March 2018 to play our part in building a democracy in which every voice can be heard. The Committee also made recommendations to a range of organisations including social media companies, political parties, Parliament, the police, and broadcast and print media. In our response we committed to encouraging and supporting those organisations to implement a number of the recommendations.

We have:

 Undertaken a public consultation entitled “Protecting the Debate: Intimidation, Influence and Information”. The consultation sought views on a proposed new electoral offence
of intimidation of candidates and campaigners, recasting the offence of undue influence, and on extending the imprints regime to cover digital electoral materials. The consultation closed in October 2018 and the Government’s response will be published in due course. As was said in the consultation, intimidatory behaviour during election campaigns harms everyone—including all voters—by putting people off taking part in elections and public service.

Consulted stakeholders on changes to deliver, and to go beyond, the recommendation for removing the requirement for the addresses of candidates at local council elections to appear on the ballot paper. The four statutory instruments to make these changes for local government, parish council, combined authority mayoral and local mayoral elections in England by Parliament, and are now in place for the local elections in May.

Consulted on our Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper, and we will publish a joint DCMS- Home Office White Paper. The White Paper will set out a range of legislative and non-legislative measures detailing how we will tackle online harms and set clear responsibilities for tech companies to keep UK citizens safe. It will establish a Government-wide approach to online safety, delivering the digital charter’s ambitions of making the UK the safest place in the world to be online, while also leading the world in innovation-friendly regulation that supports the growth of the tech sector. It will also include ambitious measures to support continued education and awareness for all users and to promote the development and adoption of new safety technologies.

Led contact with other five eyes countries (Australia; New Zealand; Canada; USA) to establish a network of learning regarding our approaches to identifying and tackling online hate crime and intimidation. This aims to identify synergies or gaps in approaches, promote consensus, and gather best practice that can be shared for the benefit of all countries.

Written to local authority chief executives, to raise awareness about the sensitive interest provisions in the Localism Act 2011 which protect the personal addresses of councillors in England, ensuring that monitoring officers are aware of the guidance published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. This has been made public on gov.uk.

Held discussions with the social media companies and the Electoral Commission about how a “pop up” social media team for elections could provide support for users that report inappropriate behaviour work and we will continue to collaborate as we explore potential next steps.

Over and above the recommendation in the Committee’s report, the Government will be considering what further steps are necessary to ensure the safety of parliamentarians and their staff, in the vicinity of Parliament, in their constituencies and online, and Ministers are open to representations from hon. Members across the House on this matter.

Alongside the work by the Government, other public bodies have been delivering on the recommendations from the Committee:

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I am pleased to announce that the Secretary of State for Defence has appointed Miss Kerry Holden as the next public sector member of the Armed Forces’ Pay Review Body. Her appointment commenced on 1 March 2019 and will run until 28 February 2022. This appointment has been conducted in accordance with the guidance of the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

The Metropolitan Police, through their parliamentary liaison and investigative team (PLAIT), provide support to all local forces on all issues relating to parliamentary candidates. Each force has a single point of contact in place, who has contact with the PLAIT through regular updates and meetings as required. In regard to social media training, the College of Policing has developed a new digital policing curriculum which includes communication offences (which social media is a part of). This is now incorporated into the policing education qualifications framework for all new starters and the college is currently developing the learning products for all existing staff to be up-skilled across the digital policing landscape including social media.

The College of Policing, in collaboration with the Electoral Commission, has been working to update the policing elections authorised professional practice on stalking and harassment, which will be available in spring 2019. The College of Policing also has a new digital policing curriculum which includes communication offences.

A working group led by the National Police Chiefs’ Council has been convened to develop guidance for parliamentary candidates in line with the Committee’s recommendations. The revised guidance will feature two complementary documents, with the intention that both guides are read in conjunction. The first signposts a rapid pathway to achieve a resolution for both criminal and non-criminal unwanted behaviour and conduct and provides advice based on the experiences of prospective candidates. This is complemented by a longer piece of guidance, which provides details of what might constitute a breach of a number of criminal laws, in order to inform and assist candidates on any contact they may have with police and the wider criminal justice system. The working group will consult with the appropriate stakeholders, including the parliamentary parties panel, with a view to publishing the full set of guidance in April 2019.

We cannot allow intimidation to threaten the vibrancy and diversity of our public life. Intimidatory behaviour impacts on the quality of our democracy and the lives of those who play an active role in it. It is incumbent on all of us in public life to combat this issue and the Government will continue to work with others including public bodies, social media companies, policing and prosecution authorities, and political parties.

DEFENCE

Armed Forces’ Pay Review Body: Appointment

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RAF Police Review

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I wish to inform the House that I am laying before the House today the second report from Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services (HMICFRS) inspection of the Royal Air Force Police (RAFP).
The Armed Forces Act 2011 places a duty on HMICFRS to inspect and report to the Ministry of Defence on the independence and effectiveness of investigations carried out by each service police force, and this is HMICFRS’s second statutory inspection report on the RAFP.

I consider this report to be a very positive endorsement of the RAFP providing assurance from an independent civilian authority that the RAFP has a strong performance management process for investigations. No recommendations were necessary although a number of areas for improvement have been identified. The Royal Air Force accepts the report’s findings and work is already under way to address the areas for improvement.

[HCWS1390]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

EU Exit: Advisory Groups on Negotiations

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): The Government are committed to working at pace with the EU to have a future relationship in place by the end of December 2020, ensuring that the backstop solution to Northern Ireland is never used. However, the Prime Minister set out to the House of Commons that the Government’s objective is to ensure that, even if the full future relationship is not in place by the end of the implementation period, the backstop is replaced by alternative arrangements. The withdrawal agreement and political declaration already set out the shared determination of the UK and the EU to replace the backstop solution in Northern Ireland by a subsequent agreement establishing alternative arrangements.

President Juncker has already confirmed with the Prime Minister that the EU will give priority to the specific work stream intended to replace the backstop with alternative arrangements. There have been further discussions on how to take forward this commitment with the EU—between the Prime Minister and President Juncker, and the Exiting the EU Secretary and Michel Barnier. The Government expect to give more shape to how the UK and EU will take these commitments forward in due course.

The Government expect that joint UK-EU work on alternative arrangements will be an important strand of the next phase of negotiations. In anticipation of this, and to ensure that the UK is ready to move at pace in the next phase, the Government are putting in place the UK’s arrangements to support the EU to replace the backstop with alternative arrangements. There have been further discussions on how to take forward this commitment with the EU—between the Prime Minister and President Juncker, and the Exiting the EU Secretary and Michel Barnier. The Government expect to give more shape to how the UK and EU will take these commitments forward in due course.

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The new groups will be constituted following the passing of the meaningful vote, and first meet in advance of the commencement of the next phase of negotiations between the UK and the EU. In the immediate term, the Government will look to engage with these groups on developing the UK’s understanding of alternative arrangements to inform negotiations with the EU, and ensure that the UK’s input is informed by a broad and inclusive range of voices domestically. Over the longer term, the Government will also consider how best these groups can contribute to their goal of ensuring that the UK is at the cutting edge of global customs policy, facilitating the greatest possible trade between the UK and the rest of the world. The Government will make available £20 million of funding, to support the development, testing or piloting of ideas that emerge from these groups where the Government believe it would be helpful.

Specifically, the technical advisory group will have a remit to support the Government on exploring approaches to reduce the risk associated with the movement of goods and for simplifying processes for businesses trading in goods. The Government will also seek the input and views of the business advisory group and parliamentary engagement group to the proposals that are brought forward, and will ensure they have the opportunity to contribute their views on how proposals might be developed.

Ministers will be supported in their engagement by the civil service. Ministers will attend the meetings, supported by those civil servants leading the work on alternative arrangements with the EU.

In the first instance, the technical advisory group will consider work drawing on, but not limited to, the following issues. The Government will also invite views from the other groups on potential areas for exploration.

Facilitations and simplifications for businesses—building on global precedents and best practice to develop the most ambitious possible trusted trader programmes, in addition to considering the scope for checks and controls to be conducted at a broader range of premises, and making processes easier for smaller traders to ensure schemes are accessible and affordable to them.

Advanced use of data and IT systems—seeking effective, secure data-sharing to provide for general customs and regulatory co-operation to anticipate and manage risk, combat customs fraud and other illegal activity, and support the recovery of claims related to taxes and duties. This includes the scope for big data to enable more advanced risk assessments and technologies.

Transit—including looking at global precedents for transit schemes, and considering how existing transit processes can be streamlined and modernised to reflect evolutions in goods movements.

Cutting-edge technologies designed to streamline and modernise border controls and support engagement with customs and regulatory processes, including:

- Radio—frequency identification (RFID) technology—which has potential to identify the movement of relevant vehicles/ consignments, and log where they have passed specific points;
App platforms—including the scope to use apps and other technologies to enable the tracking of goods movements across borders, in a way that can address legitimate concerns about data gathering and retention; and

Single windows—assessing the scope for allowing traders to lodge all information relevant to the movement of goods in one place, rather than across different platforms, and considering the scope for interoperability between the UK and the EU and other partners; and

Machine learning and automatic intelligence to allow traders to automate the collection and submission of data.

The minimisation and simplification of processes surrounding trade in commodities which are prohibited or restricted, including those associated with requirements for regulatory checks and controls. This will include an assessment of their interface with customs proposals.

All three groups will have a particular focus on how any arrangements take into account the UK’s commitments to protect respective legal orders and markets, and avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland. They will also take into account how arrangements can apply more broadly beyond the specific focus on how they would operate in the unique circumstances of Northern Ireland, to include how they could also help facilitate trade between the UK and EU.

The Government will provide a further update to Parliament, including on the membership of the respective groups, at the earliest opportunity in the coming weeks.

[HCWS1386]

EU Exit: International Arrangements

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): The Government’s aim remains to ensure that the UK leaves the EU on 29 March with a negotiated deal which honours the result of the referendum. As the UK leaves the EU, it will also leave a number of international agreements to which it is currently party by virtue of EU membership. If the UK leaves with a deal, the EU has agreed that it will notify treaty partners and third countries that the UK is treated as an EU member state for the purposes of its international agreements during the implementation period up until 31 December 2020. This approach provides a basis for the UK to continue to be covered by EU international agreements during the implementation period. During this period, the UK will also be able to negotiate, sign and ratify new international agreements that come into effect after the implementation period ends. This approach provides continuity and gives businesses and international partners the certainty and confidence they want and need.

However, the Government are also continuing to plan for all eventualities, including a no-deal scenario. Colleagues across Government have been working with our third-country partners and international organisations to transition existing EU international agreements. My Department has co-ordinated the cross-departmental programme for the delivery of these agreements across a broad range of sectors, including fisheries, nuclear and transport.

This is essential preparation for our departure from the EU to ensure the UK can, where relevant and possible, maintain the benefits of these agreements, thereby providing continuity and stability to businesses and individuals.

It is the duty of Government to ensure that, as we leave the EU, business and citizens have the certainty, clarity and access to information they want and need in order that they can prepare accordingly. Departments have been communicating progress on plans to transition agreements to stakeholders and, where necessary, laying agreements before Parliament for scrutiny ahead of ratification.

In addition to this, my Department is today publishing on gov.uk further information on international agreements in the form of guidance, which will support stakeholders in preparing for our departure from the EU, and information on specific agreements. This information details those agreements that the Government are seeking to transition, including in a no-deal scenario, and clarifies whether they are expected to be in place for 29 March 2019. This information will be updated as further international agreements are agreed, signed and ratified. This includes information relating to trade agreements.

Further details on trade continuity were recently published by the Department for International Trade on 21 February: https://www.gov.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2019-02-21/HCWS1352/.

If the UK leaves the EU without a deal, it will not be possible to complete the transition of all agreements by 29 March 2019. Where an agreement or arrangement is not in place on exit day, the Government will seek to ensure successor agreements and arrangements are in place as soon as possible thereafter. The information that will be available on gov.uk ensures that our stakeholders are aware where this is the case.

For those EU agreements for which the transition is not yet complete, discussions continue with our international partners to replicate their effects as far as possible and to minimise any potential disruption, and more agreements are likely to be finalised ahead of exit day. Unless an exceptional case should arise, the Government will continue to lay treaties subject to ratification before Parliament for scrutiny in accordance with the provisions of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 (CRaG Act).

Given that there are limited sitting days, we are also exploring other means through which we could prevent any potential gaps. One option would be the use of provisional application. Provisional application would allow an agreement to be applied after signature, but before ratification, pending completion of parliamentary scrutiny. This would enable the Government to deliver their policy objective of securing continuity for the effects of existing EU-third country international agreements as far as possible. In exceptional cases it may be justified for the Government to use their powers under section 22 of the CRaG Act and ratify a treaty without parliamentary scrutiny, thus ensuring continuity from exit day. However, the Government’s strong preference remains to avoid using this power unless there was a justifiable case for doing so.

Specific country situations

It is not the Government’s intention to transition all agreements in their entirety. This includes the EEA agreement, the EU-Swiss free movement of persons agreement and the Ankara agreement.

The EEA EFTA states (Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein) participate in the EU single market through their membership of the European economic area (EEA),
The EEA agreement is the primary basis for the UK’s current co-operation with these countries in a number of important areas, including on trade and citizens’ rights to reside and work in another EEA state. The trade elements of our relationship with these countries are described in the annexed list available as an online attachment.

In the absence of any further action, the EEA agreement will no longer operate in respect of the UK when we leave the EU, including in a no-deal scenario. However, if the UK leaves with a deal, the EU has agreed that it will notify treaty partners and third countries that the UK is treated as an EU member state for the purposes of its international agreements during the implementation period up until 31 December 2020. This includes the EEA agreement. Once the implementation period ends, the UK will no longer be covered by the EEA agreement.

The UK and the EEA EFTA states have reached an agreement, which will mean that in a no-deal scenario UK and EEA EFTA nationals living in each other’s countries before exit day will be able to continue living their lives broadly as they do today. The Government have also published guidance on how the EU settlement scheme, which will be open to EEA EFTA nationals, will work after exit day.

Through the UK’s membership of the EU, we are party to the EU-Swiss free movement of persons agreement. In a no-deal scenario, this agreement will no longer apply to the UK from exit day.

The UK and Switzerland have reached an agreement which will mean that in a no-deal scenario UK and Swiss nationals living in each other’s countries before exit day will be able to continue living their lives broadly as they do today. The Government have also published guidance on how the EU settlement scheme, which will be open to Swiss nationals, will work after exit day.

We are in discussions with Switzerland on transitional arrangements for UK workers wishing to move to Switzerland and Swiss workers wishing to move to the UK after exit in a no-deal scenario. We are close to reaching an agreement and details on this will be published in the near future.

Turkey’s relationship with the EU is largely governed by the agreement creating an association between the Republic of Turkey and the European economic community (also referred to as the Ankara agreement) and its additional protocols and council decisions. The trade elements of our relationship with Turkey are described in the annexed list available as an online attachment.

Turkish nationals enjoy particular rights derived from the Ankara agreement. Following exit from the EU, the UK’s obligation to this agreement falls away either after 31 December 2020 in a no-deal scenario, or earlier in a no-deal scenario. However, as a transitional arrangement, the UK will seek to replicate the effect of the ECAA arrangements for the resident Turkish population. This will allow resident ECAA workers and ECAA business persons and their family members to apply for further leave with similar eligibility requirements as they have now, and apply to settle in the UK. We have not yet entered into any commitments in respect of Turkish nationals arriving after the UK’s departure in a no-deal situation.

I hope the House welcomes this statement as a demonstration of our commitment to transparency in our approach to transitioning international agreements, and will agree that it will help those affected to prepare for all eventualities.

Online attachments are available at: https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2019-03-07/HCWS1392/.

[HCWS1392]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Middle East and Yemen

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): The United Nations describes the situation in Yemen as the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. Of a population of less than 30 million people, 24 million depend on aid for their food and medicines. The number of children treated for malnutrition exceeds 420,000. The number who have died from starvation is estimated to be in excess of 85,000. Behind these stark numbers are individual men, women and children. Their suffering is caused not by natural disaster but by man-made conflict. I will update the House on my visit to the region and my judgment about the prospects for the Stockholm peace process. I want to start by commending the extraordinary efforts of UN special envoy Martin Griffiths, without whom Stockholm would not have happened.

My message on this trip to all parties was simple: the ceasefire in Hodeidah, the first sustained ceasefire since the conflict began four years ago, is in peril. It will not last unless what was agreed is implemented in full—and time is running out.

On Sunday, I was the first western Foreign Minister to visit Yemen since the war began. I travelled to Aden where I met the Deputy Prime Minister of the legitimate Government of Yemen, along with the Foreign Minister and the Interior Minister. Our talks were in the presidential palace where the scars of battle were visible. I emphasised how all sides must redeploy their forces away from the port of Hodeidah. The Stockholm agreement requires them to hand over control to neutral local security forces “in accordance with Yemeni law and answering to local state institutions”. That matters because Hodeidah is the entry point for about 70% of Yemen’s food imports. Over 50,000 metric tonnes of grain from the world food programme are stored in the port. Unless the withdrawal happens they cannot be distributed to the rest of the country. I ask the House to reflect on the obscenity of people starving to death in a country where food is just sitting idly in a port because warring parties will not allow it to be released. But a ceasefire in Hodeidah was also meant to be the first step to a nationwide ceasefire. If trust can be established there, it has the potential to be a bridge to the lasting political settlement sought by all sides. But if it cannot, and Stockholm is not implemented rapidly, the ceasefire will end and the prospects for humanitarian relief evaporate.
After meeting Government of Yemen representatives, I travelled by helicopter to Aden’s port where a United Nations official described the unique challenges of distributing aid in a country torn by conflict.

I also met Mohammed Abdulsalam, spokesman for the Houthis, in Oman. I listened carefully to their concern but also delivered a candid message about the need to act quickly to save the Stockholm agreement. I also requested humanitarian access for UN helicopters and NGOs, which is currently either impeded or prevented.

I also travelled to Saudi Arabia where I met President Hadi of Yemen and his Foreign Minister as well as my Saudi counterparts, Adel al-Jubeir and Ibrahim al-Assaf.

Finally, I visited the United Arab Emirates, where I held talks with my counterpart, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed. I welcomed the restraint shown by the Saudi-led coalition in Hodeidah since the Stockholm agreement but also reiterated my judgment that no side in this conflict can achieve outright military victory. The only way ahead is a negotiated political settlement. In the meantime, Britain and our allies are doing everything possible to alleviate the human suffering. Last month, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced another £200 million of British aid for Yemen, enough to treat 20,000 children for malnutrition and provide food for 3.8 million people for a month.

This year, the UN has asked for over £3.2 billion to cope with the emergency in Yemen—the largest humanitarian appeal ever. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have each pledged over £570 million. But the people of Yemen cannot be expected to depend on outside aid forever. From my meetings in the region, I concluded that all parties genuinely want Stockholm to succeed, but there is a profound lack of trust and a deep reluctance to take the necessary steps in case they are not reciprocated. But in any successful peace process, all sides must take risks that are deeply uncomfortable. The Government of Yemen are understandably worried that without military pressure, the Houthis will not negotiate seriously. The Houthis, meanwhile, do not wish to hand over Hodeidah to any force that might be under Government control.

I told all sides that the only way to truly build confidence is for all parties to decide precisely what they promised in Sweden, including not just leaving Hodeidah but also prisoner exchanges, paying salaries to Government employees, and allowing full humanitarian access to UN agencies. We then need to move rapidly on to discuss a long term political settlement, including the creation of a Government of national unity in which all sides are represented. The Stockholm peace process is our best chance yet to end this war. But the window for implementing it is closing. In the critical weeks that lie ahead, Britain will use every diplomatic and humanitarian lever we have to ensure this opportunity does not slip away.

[HCWS1383]

HOME DEPARTMENT

EU Settlement Scheme

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is today laying before Parliament a statement of changes in immigration rules (HC 1919). The changes provide for the full opening of the EU settlement scheme from 30 March 2019 for resident EU citizens and their family members to obtain the UK immigration status they will require in order to remain here permanently after the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union.

The Government are also laying before Parliament today two negative procedure statutory instruments: the Immigration and Nationality (Fees) (Refund, Waiver and Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which provide for no application fee for the scheme as announced by the Prime Minister on 21 January 2019, and the Immigration (European Economic Area Nationals) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which, in part, make changes associated with the scheme to other secondary legislation.

Protecting EU citizens’ rights remains our number one priority. We value the contribution they make to the social, economic and cultural fabric of the UK and we want them to stay. The best way to protect their rights, and those of UK nationals resident in the EU, is for the UK to reach a withdrawal agreement with the EU. However, as a responsible Government we are planning for all scenarios. In response to the proposal put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa), my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has written to the EU about the possibility of a joint UK/EU commitment to preserving the citizens’ rights part of the withdrawal agreement in the event the UK withdraws from the EU without a deal. We await their response. The full opening of the EU settlement scheme will enable EU citizens and their family members to secure their UK immigration status whether a deal is reached or not.

In the light of the successful testing of the online application process for the scheme during the private beta test phases from August to December 2018, in which we received and processed more than 30,000 applications, a public beta test phase of the scheme began on 21 January 2019. This phase is open to resident EU citizens (and their EU citizen family members) with a valid passport, and to their non-EU citizen family members with a valid biometric residence card. In this public beta phase, we received more than 120,000 applications by the end of February 2019, enabling us to test the system at a greater scale than previous phases.

By the end of February 2019, more than 105,000 of these applications had been concluded, with 71% granted settled status, the rest granted pre-settled status and none refused. 75% of these applicants received their decision within three days and 80% of those who provided feedback found the online application process easy, or fairly easy, to complete. A report on the public beta test phase will be published after its conclusion on 30 March 2019.

This means that, since the opening of the initial private beta test phase on 28 August 2018, we had, by the end of February 2019, received more than 150,000 applications under the scheme, of which 135,000 (nearly 90%) had already been concluded. Of these concluded cases, 71% were granted settled status, with the rest granted pre-settled status and none refused.

The Government therefore intend to go ahead, as planned, with the full opening of the EU settlement scheme from 30 March 2019. The immigration rules for the scheme contained in the new appendix EU include the following changes to the scope of the scheme:
Resident citizens of the other European Economic Area (EEA) countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway) and of Switzerland, and their family members, will also be able to apply for UK immigration status under the scheme, in line with the citizens' rights agreements reached with those countries; EEA and Swiss citizens and certain family members will from 9 April 2019 be able to apply under the scheme from outside the UK, so that they can obtain status under it, based on their previous residence in the UK, without needing to travel here in order to make an online application;

The scheme will be open to the family members of British citizens who were exercising their free movement rights under EU law before returning to the UK ("Surinder Singh" cases), and to the family members of certain dual British/EEA citizens ("Lounes" cases);

The scheme will be open to others lawfully resident in the UK by virtue of a “derivative right” to reside, based on wider EU law. These are “Chen carers" (the primary carer of a self-sufficient EEA citizen child), “Ibrahim and Teixeira" cases (a child of a former EEA citizen worker who is in education in the UK and their primary carer), and “Zambrano carers" (the primary carer of a British citizen child or dependent adult);

Residence in the Crown dependencies (Guernsey, Jersey and the Isle of Man) will be counted as UK residence for the purposes of the scheme, consistent with the wider operation of the common travel area;

EEA and Swiss citizens previously resident in the UK will be able to count as UK residence for the purposes of the scheme time spent on an overseas posting as a Crown servant, as will a partner or child of any nationality accompanying such a person or accompanying a member of HM Forces on an overseas posting. Such EEA and Swiss citizens have made a strong commitment to the UK by serving overseas in this way, or by accompanying someone who is doing so, and this should not disadvantage them under the scheme; and

Consistent with the basis on which the scheme will operate in a “no-deal” scenario, provision is made for the “specified date”, by which EEA and Swiss citizens will need to be continuously resident in the UK and certain relevant family relationships will need to be formed, to be 29 March 2019 in that scenario rather than 31 December 2020.

The new appendix EU also includes the following changes to the application process for the scheme:

There will be no application fee under the scheme, as the Prime Minister announced on 21 January 2019;

In certain circumstances, an application under the scheme will be made on a paper application form rather than through the online application process, including in “derivative right” cases where the applicant will need to provide additional information to that generally required under the scheme, and in exceptional circumstances, where provision of a paper application form complements the assisted digital support available for applicants who need help to complete the online application process;

Applicants in the UK will be able to rely on a wider range of documents as proof of their identity and nationality: their valid national identity card for an EEA or Swiss citizen, as well as their valid passport, and their valid passport or biometric residence permit for a non-EEA/Swiss citizen family member, as well as their valid biometric residence card;

There will be scope for applicants to submit their identity document by post to be checked and returned to them quickly, as an alternative, for EEA/Swiss citizens and for non-EEA/Swiss citizens with a biometric residence card, to use the identity verification app on one of the locations at which they can be helped to use this (of which there will be at least 50 across the UK by 30 March 2019); and

There will also be scope for the Secretary of State to accept alternative evidence of identity and nationality where the applicant is unable to provide the required document due to circumstances beyond their control or to compelling practical or compassionate reasons.

This statement of changes in immigration rules makes the following other provision associated with the EU settlement scheme:

Consistent with the draft withdrawal agreement with the EU, the new appendix EU (Family permit) provides for a non-EEA/Swiss citizen who is the family member of an EEA/Swiss citizen with status granted under the EU settlement scheme to apply for an entry clearance to join that EEA/Swiss citizen in the UK, or to accompany them here, whether for a short stay or to make an application under the scheme in the UK;

Changes to part 1 and part 9 of the rules to ensure that the grounds for the revocation of an entry clearance granted under appendix EU (Family permit), the refusal or cancellation of leave to enter held by virtue of a person having arrived in the UK with such an entry clearance, and the cancellation or curtailment of leave to enter or remain granted under appendix EU are consistent with the EU law public policy tests for conduct committed before 31 December 2020 (or before 29 March 2019 in a “no-deal” scenario) and with UK suitability provisions for conduct thereafter; and

Enables an application for administrative review of a decision under the scheme to be made outside the UK as well as within the UK, reflecting the scope for overseas applications under the scheme.

The full opening of the EU settlement scheme from 30 March 2019 will provide a straightforward and user-friendly means for resident EEA and Swiss citizens and their family members to remain here permanently. They make a huge contribution to our economy and society and the full opening of the scheme is tangible evidence that we want them to stay.

Further information about the EU settlement scheme is available on gov.uk and was summarised in my 12 February 2019 letter to colleagues. This contained links to a range of further communications material about the scheme which community organisations and others may find helpful, and is available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/eu-settlement-scheme-update

[HCWS1387]

Home Office Funding 2018-19

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £500 million will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Home Office. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure ahead of the resource being voted, estimated at £500 million, will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

[HCWS1385]

Immigration Rules

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is today laying before the House a statement of changes in Immigration Rules (HC 1919).

Entrepreneurs and investors play key roles in creating jobs and driving economic growth and innovation in the UK. The Government are committed to ensuring our immigration system continues to attract individuals from around the globe who will create innovative businesses in the UK and make substantial investments in our economy.

The changes we are introducing today include two new visa routes that enhance the UK’s offer to overseas entrepreneurial talent:
The start-up visa, announced by my right hon. Friend, the Home Secretary, in June 2018, will provide for those starting a new business for the first time in the UK.

The Innovator category will be for more experienced business people who have funds to invest in their business. Both new categories will build on the endorsement model which has proved successful in our graduate entrepreneur and exceptional talent routes. Business experts, rather than the Home Office, will assess applicants’ business ideas for their innovation, viability and scalability, to identify those that will bring the greatest benefits to the UK. These organisations will include business accelerators, seed competitions and Government agencies, as well as higher education providers.

These new routes will replace the existing tier 1 entrepreneur and graduate entrepreneur routes, which have attracted some high-quality businesses, but the tier 1 entrepreneur route also has a long tail of low quality projects which contribute little or nothing to the wider UK economy. We will keep the existing routes open for a transitional period to allow those who are already in them to extend their stay and settle if they meet the existing requirements.

The immigration rules for the new routes are designed to be clearer and easier to read. Endorsement will reduce the evidence which applicants need to submit to the Home Office and provide them with greater certainty. The rules for extensions and settlement are more flexible, recognising there are many ways in which a business may benefit the economy. Accelerated settlement continues to be available for the most successful innovators, and extensions of stay are provided for those whose businesses fail and who wish to try a new business idea.

Parliamentarians and anti-corruption campaigners have expressed concerns about whether the tier 1 Investor route is sufficiently robust against financial crime. There is also more that can be done to increase the benefits of applicants’ investments to the UK economy.

We are therefore introducing changes that require investors to provide evidence of the source of any investment funds they have obtained within the last two years—up from 90 days at present. We are requiring UK banks to confirm they have carried out the checks they are required to make before opening an investment account. We are excluding investment in government bonds and tightening the rules around investment in companies.

We also intend to require investors to undergo enhanced checks on their financial situations and business histories, carried out by a UK regulated auditor, before making a visa application. We are working with industry to develop this requirement, with a view to introducing it in a future immigration rules change.

Minor changes are being made to the Government stateless leave policy to simplify the route to settlement for those who are genuinely stateless by granting an initial 5 years’ limited leave rather than 30 months’. We are also taking steps to protect the integrity of this route and deter abusive applications by making clearer in the rules that someone must show they have tried to obtain a nationality or right of permanent residence in a country they could reasonably expect to be entitled to, before benefiting from stateless leave.

In May last year, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, committed to look again at what we could do to make it easier for family members of Afghan locally engaged staff, who worked for UK forces in Afghanistan, to come here. Minor changes will give effect to this commitment, so those who were part of a family before the local staff member relocated can benefit from the relocation scheme rather than having to apply under family migration rules.

Finally, appendix H of the immigration rules contains a list of countries of low immigration risk whose nationals benefit from a streamlined application process for students. 2018 saw the expansion of visa national countries included in appendix H for the first time, which benefitted tens of thousands of students.

Careful consideration is given to which countries could be added to appendix H, taking into account objective analysis of a range of factors including the volume of students from a country and their tier 4 immigration compliance risk. The latest annual review of appendix H has resulted in the inclusion of Brazil, Kazakhstan, Mauritius, Oman, Peru and Tunisia; whilst Argentina, the Maldives, and Trinidad and Tobago are being removed from the list. This will result in approximately 4,500 additional students being able to benefit from appendix H.

The list of countries in appendix H will be kept under review and regularly updated to reflect the fact that countries’ risk profiles change over time.

[HCWS1388]

TRANSPORT

Air Services to the EU

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): Leaving the EU with a deal remains the Government’s top priority. This has not changed. However, a responsible Government must plan for every eventuality, including a no-deal scenario.

In December, Cabinet agreed to proceed with the Government’s next phase of no-deal planning. This means we are setting in motion our remaining no-deal plans.

Both the EU and the UK have been clear that they are committed to maintaining air services in any scenario. Aviation links are a key priority for the Department for Transport. The UK has the third largest aviation network in the world, and the biggest in Europe. Air travel is vital for both the UK and the EU in connecting people and businesses, facilitating tourism and trade. The UK and EU have a mutual interest in maintaining well-functioning aviation markets.

The Government have made preparations to deliver continuity of air services between the UK and the EU in the event that the UK leaves the EU without a withdrawal agreement. We set out in our technical notices in September 2018 that the UK would take a pragmatic approach to any no-deal scenario, and provide EU airlines with permission to operate. We expected EU countries to reciprocate and provide permissions to UK airlines.

Following this, the European Commission proposed a regulation to ensure air connectivity in the event that the UK leaves without a withdrawal agreement. A final
version of the draft regulation has been provisionally agreed by the EU. This is expected to be confirmed by the Council and the European Parliament shortly. The provisionally agreed EU regulation is intended to apply after the UK leaves the EU, and would entitle UK airlines to continue operating air services from the UK to the EU until March 2020.

Accordingly, I am today publishing a policy statement to set out how the UK intends to provide the necessary permissions to member state airlines in order for them to operate to the UK. We have made all decisions in relation to how the UK will reciprocate based on three key principles. First, we want to provide certainty and reassurance to industry and consumers. Secondly, we want to minimise the potential for disruption. Finally, we want to maintain a level playing field for UK industry, ahead of future negotiations.

Full details on how the UK will reciprocate are set out in the policy statement. In short, for the 12 month duration of the EU regulation, the UK intends to reciprocate the rights provided in the EU’s regulation, and grant EU air carriers a level of access to the UK at least equivalent to the rights that would be granted to UK airlines under the regulation. This includes traffic rights, ownership and control, leasing of aircraft, co-operative marketing arrangements and fair competition. As an exceptional measure to ensure the continuity of regional services and to minimise disruption, we will for a short period go further and allow member state airlines to operate wholly within the UK for the IATA summer season 2019, which ends on 27 October 2019, ensuring continued regional connectivity and providing time for EU businesses to adjust to new arrangements. We will also allow code sharing on existing services to continue.

While continuing to plan for all eventualities, we also believe that it is right to underline the fact that the UK is taking a positive and pragmatic approach. Overall, we continue to believe that liberal, reciprocal market access is in the best interest of the EU countries and the UK, and we will move swiftly to propose negotiations on this basis in the event that the UK leaves without a withdrawal agreement.

[HCWS1384]
Petition

Monday 25 February 2019

OBSERVATIONS

EDUCATION
College funding

The petition of students at Brockenhurst College in the New Forest East constituency,

Declares that college funding must be urgently increased to sustainable levels, including immediate parity with recently announced increases to school funding, which will give all students a fair chance, give college staff fair pay and provide the high quality skills the country needs post-Brexit; further that funding for colleges has been cut almost by 30% in the last 10 years causing a significant reduction in the resources available for teaching and support of sixth formers in schools and colleges; potentially restricted course choice; fewer adults in learning; pressures on staff pay and workload; and further that an online Parliamentary petition on this matter received 40,000 signatures in its first week and now stands at 58,000.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department of Education, together with her Majesty's Treasury to increase at the earliest opportunity funding for colleges to fair and sustainable levels.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[Presented by Dr Julian Lewis, Official Report, 29 November 2018; Vol. 650, c. 491.]

Observations from the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton):

Further education providers have a vital role to play in making sure young people and adults have the skills they need to get on in life. We are aware of the financial pressures in the further education sector generally which is why we are currently considering the efficiency and resilience of the sector and assessing how far existing funding and regulatory structures meet the costs of delivering quality further education.

We have protected the base rate of funding for all 16 to 19-year old students until 2020 and plan to invest nearly £7 billion this academic year to make sure there is a place in education or training, including for apprenticeships, for every 16 to 19-year-old.

In addition, we have announced extra support for key priorities. We will provide additional funding to support institutions to grow participation in level 3 maths—an extra £600 for every additional student—with two payments of £600 if, for example, they are studying A level maths over two years. The first of these payments will be made in 2019-20. We have also approved significant restructuring funding for colleges. From 1 April 2016 to 31 January 2019, the total allocation of restructuring facility funding in England is approximately £470 million—the total spend so far is approximately £290 million.

We recently announced a pay settlement for school teachers and a specific grant to support this. However, further education colleges and sixth form colleges have a different status when compared with schools and academies, as private sector institutions independent of the Government. Therefore, we are considering the needs of further education providers separately.

Through the Adult Education Budget (AEB), we continue to provide full funding for adult learners who need English and maths skills to undertake a range of courses in GCSEs, functional skills and stepping stone qualifications from entry level to level 2. We have also announced a new statutory basic digital skills entitlement from 2020 to ensure adults can study for specified qualifications in basic digital skills free of charge to get the skills and capabilities they need to get on in life and work. We also recognise the vital role that community learning plays within AEB provision by providing accessible routes for adults to progress, and we fund this in a way that enables providers to meet the needs of disadvantaged learners. By 2020, funding available to support adult FE participation, including the AEB, 19+ apprenticeship funding and advanced learner loans, is planned to be higher than at any time in England’s history. The Department has also taken the steps through Parliament to devolve the responsibility for adult education to metropolitan mayors, which is intended to allow for greater alignment of funding for this kind of provision to local need.

We will be looking hard in the forthcoming spending review at how to ensure adequate funding is available for further education, including adult skills, throughout the next spending review period.

An e-petition calling on the Government to “increase college funding to sustainable levels” was submitted and selected for debate by the Petitions Committee. The debate took place in Westminster Hall on 21 January 2019 and the Hansard record is available here: https://www.hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2019-01-21/debates/105E82C9-81FC-4C3B-B9D99F1D07DF/CollegeFunding.

You can find our written response to this petition here: https://wwwpetition.parliament.uk/petitions/229744.
Petition

Monday 4 March 2019

OBSERVATION

TRANSPORT

Roadside littering from vehicles

The petition of the residents of Falkirk constituencies

Declares that roadside litter discarded from moving vehicles in an unacceptable blight in our communities and increases risk to other motorists and costs to local authorities and private business; further that it causes flooding in drainage infrastructure, causes disruption to normal traffic flow and is a national embarrassment, specifically to the tourist industry; and further that it contradicts the sustainable, renewable and green ambitions the communities of Falkirk desire.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department for Transport to instruct the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) to issue penalty points on the driving licences of individuals who allow litter to be thrown from their vehicle.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by John McNally, Official Report, 12 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 854.]

Observations from The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman):

I thank the residents of Falkirk and their MP. The role of the Driver Vehicle and Licensing Agency (DVLA) is to ensure that complete and accurate registers of drivers and vehicles are held. The DVLA's registers are maintained to assist road safety, law enforcement and the collection of vehicle excise duty.

The DVLA has no powers to impose penalty points on a driver's record for any offence. Only the courts can impose penalty points, upon conviction for a relevant offence. The DVLA's job in this regard is to record penalty points on a driver's record when notified as such by the courts.
The petition of the parents, carers, staff and governors of Triangle, maintained nursery school in Lambeth.

Declares that we are concerned about the future of maintained nursery schools in England after March 2020 as no guarantee has been given by the Government that adequate funding will continue when supplementary funding ends.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons to urge the Government to take action to ensure nursery schools are financially sustainable for the future.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Lucy Powell, Official Report, 5 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 295.]

Other petitions on the same terms from the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) are: [P002424], [P002425], [P002370], [P002371], [P002372], [P002373], [P002374], [P002375], [P002376], [P002377], [P002378], [P002379], [P002380], [P002381], [P002382], [P002383], [P002384], [P002385], [P002386], [P002387], [P002388], [P002389], [P002390], [P002391], [P002392], [P002393], [P002394], [P002395], [P002402], [P002403], [P002404], [P002405], [P002406], [P002407], [P002409].

Petitions in the same terms were presented by the hon. Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson) [P002421], [P002422], [P002423]; the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) [P002312]; the hon. Member for Halton (Derek Twigg) [P002313]; the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) [P002314], [P002321]; the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) [P002315]; the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) [P002316], [P002317], [P002318], [P002327], [P002344]; the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) [P002319], [P002320], [P002322]; the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) [P002324]; the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) [P002325]; the hon. Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) [P002326]; the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Dame Louise Ellman) [P002328]; the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) [P002329], [P002340], [P002342], [P002343], [P002345], [P002346]; the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) [P002330], [P002332], [P002333], [P002334], [P002335]; the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham P. Jones) [P002331], [P002349]; the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) [P002336], [P002337]; the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) [P002338]; the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) [P002339]; the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) [P002341], [P002347]; the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) [P002348]; the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) [P002350]; the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) [P002351]; the hon. Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker) [P002352], [P002408], [P002417]; the right hon. Member for Chippenham (Theresa Villiers) [P002353], [P002354], [P002355]; the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) [P002356]; the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) [P002357], [P002358], [P002359], [P002360]; the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) [P002361]; the hon. Member for Dewlisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) [P002362]; the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) [P002363], [P002364]; the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) [P002365], [P002366]; the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) [P002367]; the right hon. Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett) [P002368], [P002369]; the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) [P002396]; the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr Djanogly) [P002398]; the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) [P002399]; the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) [P002400]; the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) [P002410]; the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) [P002411]; the Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty’s Treasury, the hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer) [P002412]; the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) [P002413], [P002414], [P002415]; the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) [P002416].

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadihim Zahawi):

Maintained nursery schools make a valuable and high quality contribution to supporting some of our most disadvantaged children. Many of them have specialist skills and knowledge in supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities, and many of them share this expertise with other early years providers.

In acknowledgement of the costs that maintained nursery schools experience over and above other early years providers, the Government are providing local authorities with around £60 million a year in supplementary funding, to enable them to maintain the funding of maintained nursery schools.

On 28 February, the Government announced that this arrangement would be extended from March 2020 to August 2020, to enable local authorities to maintain the funding of maintained nursery schools for the whole of the 2019-20 academic year. This means that local authorities can allocate places in maintained nursery schools for September 2019 without uncertainty over the summer term in 2020. The cost of this extension will be around £24 million.

What happens after the 2019-20 academic year will be determined by the next spending review, and informed by new research published on 28 February on the services, costs and quality of maintained nursery schools.
Ministerial Corrections

Wednesday 27 February 2019

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Trade Remedy Measures: UK Interests

The following is an extract from a statement to the House on 25 February 2019.

Dr Fox: Of 109 existing EU measures, we will maintain 43 where they are directly applicable to the UK and have met the criteria to be maintained. Those measures cover a wide range of goods, from ironing boards to aluminium foil, to ensure continued protection from known unfair trading practices for important industries such as steel and ceramics.

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox):

An error has been identified in the statement I made to the House.

The correct wording should have been:

Dr Fox: Of 109 existing EU measures, we will maintain 43 of those measures where they are directly applicable to the EU and have met the criteria to be maintained. Those measures cover a wide range of goods, from ironing boards to aluminium foil, to ensure continued protection from known unfair trading practices for important industries such as steel and ceramics.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Topical Questions

The following is an extract from Foreign and Commonwealth Questions on 26 February 2019.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): The stability of Lebanon is vital to the wider security situation in the middle east. It has taken Prime Minister Hariri nine months to put together a Government that reflects all the different complex denominations and sects in Lebanon, including several Ministers from Hezbollah. What discussions have the British Government had with Prime Minister Hariri or the Lebanese Government about the proscription of the political wing of that organisation?

Alistair Burt: By good fortune, the Prime Minister and I met the Prime Minister of Lebanon on Sunday at the summit in Sharm el-Sheikh. We were able to discuss not only the issue relating to Hezbollah, but our own efforts to support the stability of the Government of Lebanon. Prime Minister Hariri recognised the support that the United Kingdom gave. We are pleased to see Lebanon’s Government formation completed and also for the Government to go forward economically, a process in which our own investment conference in December was a landmark event.

Letter of correction from the Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt):

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire).

The correct response should have been:

Alistair Burt: By good fortune, the Prime Minister and I met the Prime Minister of Lebanon on Sunday at the summit in Sharm el-Sheikh. We were able to discuss not only the issue relating to Hezbollah, but our own efforts to support the stability of the Government of Lebanon. Prime Minister Hariri recognised the support that the United Kingdom gave. We are pleased to see Lebanon’s Government formation completed and also for the Government to go forward economically, a process in which our own investment conference in December was a landmark event.

UK Soft Power

The following is an extract from Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions on Tuesday 26 February 2019.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): The Minister is right to point out outside organisations. Will he, like me, pay due credit to the brave non-governmental organisations that do fantastic work and enhance our soft power in some of the most difficult conflict environments in the world, not least Yemen? Today, the United Nations is appealing for £3.2 billion to help organisations such as Saferworld and International Rescue Committee. Should that not be our focus, rather than the £4.6 billion we spent on arms?

Mark Field: We have announced only today, in the aftermath of the Sharm el-Sheikh negotiations, that we will be putting a further £200 million into Yemen. It is important to recognise the tremendous contribution made by so many British citizens and British NGOs across the globe. That is one aspect of soft power that will enhance our standing in the years to come. It is in this sort of area where I hope we will continue.

Letter from the Minister for Asia and the Pacific, the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field),

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins).

The correct response should have been:

Mark Field: We announced on Sunday, in the aftermath of the Sharm el-Sheikh negotiations, that we will be putting a further £200 million into Yemen. It is important to recognise the tremendous contribution made by so many British citizens and British NGOs across the globe. That is one aspect of soft power that will enhance our standing in the years to come. It is in this sort of area where I hope we will continue.
Ministerial Correction

Thursday 28 February 2019

EDUCATION
Instrumental Music Tuition

The following is an extract from the Adjournment debate on 25 February 2019.

Nick Gibb: We are also providing £2 million for national youth music organisations such as the National Youth Orchestra and £2 million for In Harmony.


Letter from the Minister for School Standards:

An error has been identified in my contribution.

The correct information should have been:

Nick Gibb: We are also providing nearly £2 million for national youth music organisations such as the National Youth Orchestra and £2 million for In Harmony.